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STAR WESTERN

BIG ROMANCES OF THE WEST

VOLUME 53 AUGUST, 1953 NUMBER 4

★ ★ ★ ★ Thrill-Packed Novelettes ★ ★ ★ ★

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ACES AND QUEENS

"MUSIC hath charms to soothe the savage breast," a great playwright named Congreve once said, and, if he hadn't been born a hundred years too early, he might have been thinking of the effect the ladies had on the menfolk in the days of the wild and womanless West. Western men always had, and still do for that matter, an enormous respect for women (what you don't have much of, you tend to handle with more tenderness and care than what you can get all the time), and when a lady appeared in a Western town in the old days, she was treated like the royalty she was. Frederic James tells the story of one English girl who took on an American outlaw and won the admiration of the Westerners. . . .

They still talk about Isabella Bird in Colorado. Even though she rode her cow pony in and out of the rugged canyons of that place nearly eighty years ago, her brief exploits have become legendary and still evoke the admiration of the old timers who heard her story from the earlier pioneers.

Back in 1873, before Colorado had even attained statehood, most men were careful about riding very far without accompaniment for protection. Perhaps that is why the residents of the time were startled to see this "greenhorn" move about the countryside with an air of complete independence. More than that, the greenhorn was a lady, and not a very big one at that.

She might easily have been dismissed as being a fool, but those who came to know her soon found out that she had been around a little before visiting the American West. She had traveled in Korea, Japan, and, before coming to Colorado, spent six months in the Sandwich Islands—alone. Now she was on her way home, and her curiosity about out-of-the-way places was not yet satisfied. So, without a second thought, she got off the train at Cheyenne and made her way into Colorado, resolving to see some of the beauties of the West before returning to England.

At Longmont, Colorado, Isabella rented a horse and prepared to ride up to Estes Park which she had heard was very beautiful. She anticipated her journey in the clean, fresh mountain air, and was glad to get away from the trainful of "chewing, spitting Yankees," as she put it.

When her mount was led out for her,

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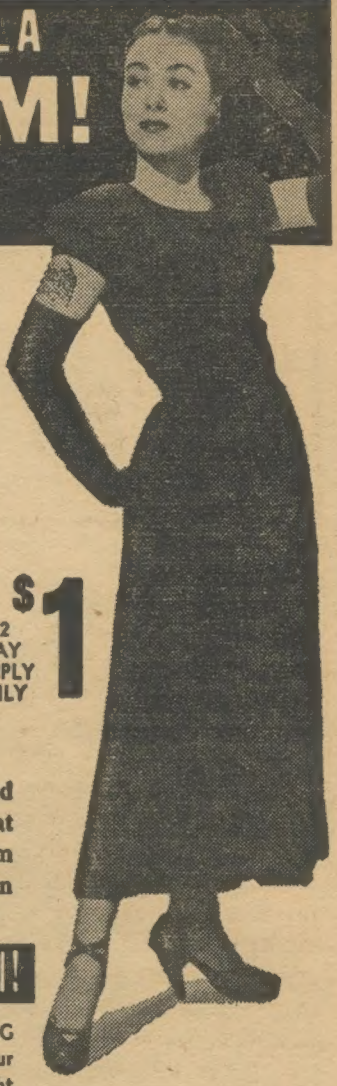

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(Continued from page 6)

she almost regretted her decision. It was a high-bred animal, restless and sensitive with neck arched and nostrils quivering. Had it not been for the fact that newspapers of the area had heard about her, and had made a great deal of her reputed horsemanship, she might have settled for a buggy. But as she looked around her, and saw a number of sidewalk loafers skeptically watching her preparations, her resolve to ride grew strong again. Up she went, into the saddle, and the nervous animal skittering off, angle-wise, across the street finally headed out of town. But Isabella statyed with him, and before long horse and horsewoman were one, proceeding peacefully, without disagreement. "I could have ridden him a hundred miles as easily as twenty-five and a half," she wrote her sister in England.

Those who were surprised at the determined young girl who rode off into the hills on a half-broken horse were positively astounded at her next performance. When reports filtered back that she had been seen with "Mountain Jim," real fears for her safety were entertained, for here was a desperado the roughest men in the territory avoided.

But Isabella had the self-confidence of a world traveler. When she first approached the hut that Mountain Jim called his home, a huge dog had growled threateningly, and the shaggy, unkempt occupant had rushed out to send the dog howling off with a well-placed kick in the ribs. Isabella looked at him in wonderment. His hunting suit was in rags, a sash around his waist contained a vicious-looking knife and a large revolver, while his whole appearance was at least as frightening as that of a savage.

The lady looked at him again, and wondered what her best course was. Taking her courage in hand, she politely asked for a drink of water and was promptly waited upon by the mountain man who apologized for the battered cup in which the drink was offered.

"You are not an American," he told her. "I know from your voice that you are a countrywoman of mine. I hope you will allow me the pleasure of calling on you."

SO ISABELLA, and Mountain Jim became friends. She, a lady from the quiet English countryside, and he a renegade from the same land, who had been long forgotten at home and was now the terror of the Rocky Mountains with the blood of more than one man on his hands. "When he's sober, Jim's a perfect gentleman; but when he's had liquor he's the most awful ruffian in Colorado," an innkeeper later told her.

Jim now became Isabella's self-appointed guide and guardian. Wherever she traveled in the Estes Park region he went with her, always polite, almost humble, threatening anyone who gave her a second look. His moods were many, and his disposition an imponderable. Men stayed their distance, and women swiftly drew their children in the house when he came near; yet Isabella appeared blithely unaware that she was being shepherded by a man as unpredictable and as dangerous as a rattlesnake. She took him calmly, and treated him with a gentle politeness that humbled him. She was a lady; Jim never forgot it for a moment, and he treated her as if she were made of Dresden China.

Sometimes she rode alone, failing to tell Jim of her plans or her destination. This bothered him, and he fretted while she was gone, but she paid no attention to his dissatisfaction. When she exhibited unusual independence, as she did one day by riding through a camp of five hundred Ute Indians near Denver, Jim was more concerned than ever. When they rode together, he was happier, and he quoted poetry to her at great length which pleased

(Continued on page 114)

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A MAN FOR THE

BOOTHILL BLONDE! • •

by Joseph Chadwick

She was beautiful, blonde, and brassy—with no more on her mind than a man—and no more in her hand than sixgun Death!

She yelled after me, "Ed, I meant it! I'm in love with you!"

THIS girl looked like a Swede to me. A blonde, with bold features, blue eyes, and, I imagined, Viking blood, she was tall; she had one of those hourglass figures, and, if a man liked his women big, as I did, he would have taken her for something out of one of his choicest dreams.

But she looked like a lady too, and, even in a tough trail-and-rail town like Hays City, it wasn't proper to stare at a respectable woman. But, hell, it had been a long time since I'd seen anything like her—and

nobody ever called Ed Bannion—that's me—a gentleman.

So I stared.

I was sitting on the awninged porch of the National House, my chair tilted back on two legs, a cigar between my teeth, and a load of trouble on my mind. It was a warm, sunshiny afternoon, one made not for trouble but for hitching up old Dobbin and driving out to a shaded creek in the hills with a picnic lunch and a cute trick for company. I was planning a picnic, all right—but alone, into No Man's Land—and all I needed was the spirit to move me.

She was dressed in green, and, when she reached the hotel, she lifted the hem of her ruffled skirt an inch or two while mounting the steps. So help me, I had a glimpse of an ankle!

Reaching the porch, she didn't enter the lobby but turned in my direction, and said, "Excuse me. . . ."

I glanced at the other chairs along the wall, and concluded that it was me she was speaking to. I let my chair down onto four legs, heaved out of it, grabbing the cigar from my mouth, and took off my hat. She was tall, all right; I stand six-two in my cowpuncher boots, but she didn't have to tilt her head back far to look into my eyes. Hers were blue, a deep blue, partially veiled by long lashes. Her complexion was flawless, satiny smooth, and glowed with a faint golden sheen. She looked wholesome. She looked good enough to eat. I felt my pulse begin to race.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"You're Ed Bannion?"

I looked surprised. "I'm Ed Bannion."

"Do you have time to talk with me, Mr. Bannion?"

"For you," I said, "I have all the time in the world."

Her frown told me that she didn't like that, but she suggested that we sit there and talk. She took the chair next to mine, sat primly erect on the edge of it with her handbag on her lap and her gloved hands holding the bag. She regarded me with doubt now, because of my brashness. I sat down, hitching my chair around so that I faced her.

"Yes, Miss—"

"*Mrs.,*" she said. "Mrs. Fred Larsen."

I cooled off a little. "Sorry, Mrs. Larsen. What can I do for you?"

She studied me with her head tilted prettily to one side. "My, you are a tough looking—man, aren't you?" The way she fumbled, it seemed as though she'd almost said "brute" instead of "man."

I said, "I haven't looked in a mirror lately."

"I didn't mean to be disrespectful, Mr. Bannion. It's just that I was told that you are a tough—is 'hombre' the word?"

"It's the word, Mrs. Larsen. Now what is it you want of me?"

"I've been talking to Sheriff Doan, and he suggested that I might be able to hire you as a guide." She smiled, very white teeth against very red lips. "You see, I came west to join my husband, but he hasn't come to meet me. I'm afraid that he didn't receive my letter stating what day I would leave Philadelphia. I was *so* disappointed when I got off the train yesterday. . . ." She looked disappointed. "So I will go to his ranch, and it will be a wonderful surprise for him."

"Oh," I said. "And where is Mr. Larsen's ranch?"

"Near a town called Sand Creek."

If I felt anything, it was suspicion. It glided through my mind like a snake. Then I told myself that it couldn't be, this girl, this very proper lady, couldn't know that I planned a trip that would take me close to Sand Creek. And that my trip had to do with thirty thousand dollars. But I shook my head.

"No."

"No?"

"Sand Creek is in No Man's Land, in the Neutral Strip. It's no place for a woman—for a respectable woman."

"But I don't understand."

"There's no law down there. And I mean no law. The Strip has never been recognized by the Congress of the United States. So it has no courts and no lawmen. There are a few settlers there, some cattlemen, and a hell of a lot of outlaws and riff-raff. The only women around Sand Creek are. . . . Well, not your kind. No, ma'am, Mrs. Larsen, I won't guide you to your husband. Send a man with a message, so he can come to you. Sorry."

Her face turned stiff with anger.

She stood up and I stood up with her.

"I would have paid you a hundred dollars and all expenses," she said. "If you change your mind, Mr. Bannion, you can find me here at the hotel."

She went past me with an angry swirling of her skirt into the hotel.

I tried to take a puff on my cigar, but it had gone out. I threw it to the street, and headed for the office of Sheriff Milt Doan.

MILT DOAN was an oldtimer. His shaggy hair and mustache were steel-gray; his eyes were, too. He was an honest man, but quiet. When I walked in, he was writing a letter at his rolltop desk, no doubt to his daughter and her family back in Missouri. He put down his pen, gave me a slow smile.

"Did you take her on, Ed?"

"No."

"I didn't think you would, even at ten times what she was willing to pay."

"What about her, Milt?"

He lifted his shoulders in a shrug. "She came in on the west-bound yesterday with a lot of luggage. Registered at the hotel, then came to see me. Her husband hadn't showed up to meet her. She wanted to know how to get to Sand Creek. I told her a person had to find his own way, that there was no public transportation to Sand Creek. I advised her, too, not to go down there but to wait until her husband showed up." He shook his head as though puzzled. "I can't figure a man not coming to meet a wife like that. Can you?"

"I'd never have left her behind in the first place," I said. "You know her husband?"

"No."

"I told her to send a message to him."

"So did I. She said that she couldn't wait, that she's already been separated from him for nearly two years. I'm worried that she'll hire the wrong man to take her."

"Is that why you sent her to me?"

"Well, I told her that you were trustworthy. But I didn't send her to you, Ed."

"Oh?"

"She came here this afternoon and told me that she'd made up her mind to hire a guide—so she called it. And she asked if the man sitting on the hotel porch might be hired and if he could be trusted. I took a look, and the man was you."

That snaky suspicion glided through my mind again. "So she was the one who picked me," I said. "She let me believe you'd pointed me out to her."

"Shucks, Ed; I knew you wouldn't take a woman like that down into No Man's Land," Milt Doan said. "I knew you'd figure like I did, that anything could happen on the way to her husband's ranch. I've been down in the Strip a time or two, and Sand Creek is about the toughest town in that country—except maybe for Sod Town. And when I say tough, I mean rotten tough—not *just* tough like this town or Dodge City. These Kansas towns have some decent people, but in Sod Town and Sand Creek there's nobody but outlaws and riff-raff and loose women."

I stood there worrying, wondering if she had somehow found out about my plans to go after that cache of money down in No Man's Land. Only two men besides myself knew, or should have known, but still I couldn't help wonder whether she hadn't found out. I told myself it was loco to be that suspicious. I argued that she wasn't foolish enough to think that she could get

the money away from me. Still, I couldn't help wonder why she'd sought me out as a guide.

"Milt, do you think she could be something other than what she claims?"

"What, for instance?"

I felt kind of foolish saying it: "Well, an adventuress, maybe."

Milt Doan wasn't one to laugh at a man. He tugged at his mustache, thinking about it. Then he said, "She looks and talks all right. I've never yet seen a counterfeit coin that looked exactly right or had the right ring. But why worry about her?"

I nodded. "That's right. Why should I let her worry me?" I walked to the door, said from there, "See you later, Milt."

He gave me a sharp look, no doubt beginning to wonder why I was worked up about this Larsen woman.

I WAS worked up about her, and not because she'd gotten into my system or anything like that. I'd lost interest in her as a woman the moment I learned that she had a husband. I wasn't a man to steal another man's woman. . . . The thing was, the more I thought about her trying to hire me for the trip into No Man's Land, the more I felt that she was trouble.

And I had trouble enough.

I felt in my pockets while I stood in front of the sheriff's office, looking for another cigar. I was fresh out, and I couldn't afford to buy more.

Being broke wasn't any calamity. I'd been broke plenty of times in my life, but always when I was younger. A young buckaroo doesn't mind being stony; I knew that from experience. But I was no longer a young buckaroo; I was thirty-two, and I'd become settled in my ways, and I felt uncomfortable over being without a stake. . . . The way it happened, I was marshal of Rawlins, Kansas, a town that had mushroomed on the railroad about seventy miles from Hays City, and I had the place pretty well tamed. I'd been no Wild Bill Hickok, but I knew how to keep the rough element of a town from getting the upperhand.

I knew too well.

There was a place called the Alhambra in Rawlins. It was a combination saloon, gambling-house, and dancehall. A man had been murdered in the Alhambra, a well-to-do tenderfoot who'd come to Kansas to shoot buffalo. This sportsman had done most of his hunting among the gay ladies of Rawlins, and he'd ended up with his head bashed in and his pockets picked clean. One of the girls had got a look into his wallet, and she'd fixed it with one of the bartenders to serve him a mickey. Either the doped drink had been weak or the sport had owned a cast-iron constitution. Anyway, he' come to and caught the girl and the bartender emptying his wallet. He'd yelled bloody murder and put up a fight. The bartender had slugged him with a lead-weighted club, but the man's yells had been heard and I'd been tipped off. I caught the barender dumping the body in a gully out behind the Alhambra.

I locked him up, then picked up the girl, and she went into hysterics and spilled the whole story. I warned the owner of the Alhambra that if any more of his customers were murdered or even rolled for their money I would close the place. Two nights later, a Texas cattleman complained that he'd been given knock-out drops in his whisky and robbed of a couple thousand dollars. I closed the Alhambra, all right.

And I lost my star because of it.

Two of the town councilmen had been part-owners, silent partners, in the Alhambra. . . . Well, I got my gear together and drew my money out of the bank—close to eighteen hundred dollars—and went to the livery stable to get my horse. A couple days before, I'd received a letter from a friend of mine in Hays City, a lawyer, telling me he had something big on the fire for me, so I figured I'd go to Hays. While I was saddling my horse, I was slugged

from behind, knocked out, and when I came to I was lying a half mile out along the road with my horse waiting nearby and my money-belt gone.

I knew better than to go back after my money. I climbed onto my horse, drifted, hitting Hays three days ago. My friend, Attorney George Payson, was away on a trip to Dodge City, but he'd returned yesterday and offered me this No Man's Land deal. It was a chance to make some money in a hurry. The trouble was, it was also a chance of getting myself killed.

I decided to see Payson now, and headed for his law office over Kyle's hardware store. I wanted to talk to him about the Larsen woman.

I climbed the open stairway at the side of the building and, just in case he had a client, knocked on the door. He called, "Come in," and I entered to find him pretending to be busy at his desk. When he saw who it was, he leaned back in his chair and propped his feet on the desk. He was thirty-five and already running to beef, thick through the middle and heavy of face. I'd known him in leaner days. But he'd done well in Hays City, and I'd given him a leg-up. I was glad that he was prospering.

"Well, Ed, have you made up your mind?"

"Yeah. I've decided to go. Made up my mind this morning."

"Good. When will you start out?"

"Today, if Meecham wants me to. I haven't told him yet."

"You want me to go with you when you tell him?"

I shook my head. "He won't tell where the money is cached if you're around. You or anybody else."

Payson lighted a cigar. "Yeah. . . . He's a close-mouthed old rannihan."

"He should be with thirty thousand dollars at stake."

"You're right, of course. Well, I wish you luck, Ed—and be careful."

I SAID that I was always careful, that my reckless days were past. He knew that. He knew me pretty well. We'd soldiered together, in the Confederate cavalry, I a Texan and he a Virginian; we'd shared three hard years and were surprised that we were alive when it was over. The stories we could tell. . . . We'd lost track of each other after the war ended, until two years ago. Then Payson had showed up in Dodge City where I was a deputy sheriff, down on his luck. He'd gotten in a jam—over a woman, he'd hinted—back in Richmond where he'd hung out his shingle after the war, and so he'd skipped and come west. I'd staked him to a couple hundred dollars, and he'd opened his law office here in Hays and now was doing all right.

He eyed me curiously. "Something on your mind, Ed?"

I told him about the woman.

He frowned and puffed on his cigar. "So what?"

"So do you think she could have heard that Meecham wants me to go after that thirty thousand dollars?"

"How could she know?"

"You didn't mention it to anybody?"

"Not a soul."

"You didn't let anything slip when you were in Dodge?"

"I didn't give the matter a thought while I was there," he said. "And until I got back I wasn't sure that you would go for the deal." He eyed me frowningly. "You think she's from Dodge?"

I knew Dodge City. It wasn't a town of homes and respectable women—and Mrs. Fred Larsen looked respectable. I shook my head.

"Well, don't worry about her."

"I won't. I'll have enough to worry about when I get to the Strip."

I turned to the door, but he said, "Ed, I've got an idea. . . ."

I faced him. "Yeah, George?"

"You're a little leery of making this trip because you feel that the men looking for

that money will spot you and take it for granted that you're after it. You're afraid they'll jump you as soon as you pick it up."

"Jump me? They'll murder me, friend."

"You're right, of course. But if you posed as a settler. . . . Look, Ed, instead of going by horseback and maybe getting recognized right off, outfit yourself with a rickety wagon and a crowbait team, wear sodbuster clothes, tie a cow to the rig's tailgate, take the woman along to pose as your wife. Quit shaving. Put a chaw in your mouth or smoke a pipe. Those Strip bushwhackers won't suspect a rube settler of coming for that loot. And if any of them know you by sight, well, they won't believe you're anything but a man who looks a little like Ed Bannion. And the woman will clinch it. Once you've got the money, you can deliver her to her husband and then come back here. You won't be risking your life that way, Ed."

I grinned. "George, you haven't seen this woman."

"What do you mean?"

"She'd never pass as a settler's woman."

"A looker, is she?"

"A dream."

Payson thought about it, then said, "Tell her to buy a gingham dress and a sunbonnet. If she dresses the part, she'll fool anybody you happen to meet. After all, not all settler women are homely. I've seen some that I. . . ." He shrugged. "It's worth a try, Ed."

"Yeah. It sounds all right. But will she go for it? Besides, I still have my suspicions of her—loco though it may seem."

"Don't tell me you're scared of a woman, Ed!"

"This one strikes me as trouble."

"I don't see how she could make trouble for you."

"I don't, either. There's something else too, George. I don't like making use of a woman."

"Well, it's up to you."

"Yeah. . . . Well, I'll see you when I get back, George. If I get back at all."

I left his office.

SAM MEECHAM was laid up in a room at Mrs. MacGregor's boarding-house. George Payson lived there, too; that's how he'd gotten to know Meecham, and to handle his affairs. I went up to Meecham's room and was surprised to find him out of bed and sitting in a rocking-chair. He was wearing a flannel robe over his nightshirt, and carpet slippers.

"Sam, this is good to see."

"I just couldn't stay flat on my back, Ed."

He was a man past sixty, and he'd been as close to death as a man could be and still come back. He looked ten years older, because of what he'd gone through, and was a pale shade of the man he must have been before he met up with those bushwhackers. He was a Texas cattleman—not a big cattleman, just a two-bit one. He'd trailed a herd to Dodge City, sold it, paid off his hands, sold his remuda too, left his chuckwagon for one of his men to drive back to Texas when the hand had tired of painting Dodge a bright shade of red. With his cattle money, about thirty-four thousand dollars, he'd sent out for home with a spare horse under light pack. A rider had followed him south from Dodge, and Meecham hadn't been able to shake him—or scare him off with rifle fire. Down in No Man's Land, this rider had been joined by four others. They'd jumped Meecham, but they made the mistake of jumping him at night, and in the darkness he'd managed to give them the slip after a gunfight in which he was shot in the left side and in which he downed two of the five.

A tough old rannihan, Sam Meecham. He'd stayed on his horse, held onto his pack-horse's halter rope, and kept going until he was in the clear. But he'd figured he was a goner, and so, determined that the bushwhackers wouldn't have his money, he hid the saddlebags containing thirty

thousand dollars in gold and silver specie. He'd had about four thousand more in paper money; he'd kept that with him, just in case he didn't die and would need to pay somebody to help him. He'd fallen off his horse finally, some miles from the cache. He'd buried his roll of bills in the sand just before he lost consciousness.

When he'd come to, his horses were gone. He'd figured that the bushwhackers had come upon him and thought him dead. They'd taken his horses, but hadn't found the four thousand dollars in the sand under him. And they hadn't found the thirty thousand he hid, else they wouldn't have bothered to hunt him. Since one of the bunch had trailed him from Dodge, they'd known how much money he was carrying—and they would have figured that he'd hidden the money somewhere between where they'd jumped him and where they found him lying, as they thought, dead. They'd certainly hunted for the money after taking his horses, but Meecham held to the idea that they wouldn't have found it.

He'd been lucky in one way. He'd been lying near the road from Sand Creek to Kansas, and about mid-day a freight rig had come along, and the freighter had seen him. The muleskinner had brought him to Hays City. That was a month ago, and now Sam Meecham, convinced that his health would never permit him to recover the money on his own, wanted a man to go after it, smart and tough enough to outwit the bushwhackers who probably knew by now that he wasn't dead and figured he would either go after the money or send somebody. He had asked George Payson to find such a man, and I was elected.

I said, "Sam, I've made up my mind to go after your money."

"I knew you had when you walked in just now."

"I'll start today, if you want."

"And your cut suits you?"

"Ten per-cent of thirty thousand suits me fine."

"Good. How much do you need to outfit?"

"Just enough for a spare horse, provisions, campgear."

"Two hundred?"

"That's more than enough," I said.

He gave me the money, then spent ten minutes telling me exactly where he'd cached the thirty thousand. When I had it straight, I shook hands with him and told him that if I didn't get back he'd know that I was dead—that he wasn't to think that I'd skipped with the money. He smiled a sick man's smile.

"I've got you pegged for a square-shooter, Ed," he said. "I'm not worried that you'll run off with my money. Luck, son. . . ."

Luck.

Leaving him, I told myself that was what I would need plenty of.

CHAPTER TWO

No Man's Land

AT DRISCOLL'S Livery Stable, I saddled my gray gelding and rigged a sorrel mare that I bought from Driscoll with a pack-saddle and then led the two animals over to Jessup's general store. I'd bought campgear and enough provisions to keep me going three weeks, just in case I ran into trouble and had to go into hiding in No Man's Land, and was packing them on the sorrel when the woman came hurrying up to me.

"You're going away, Mr. Bannion?" Her voice was accusing. "Without helping me?"

I looked at her, and maybe it was just an illusion but she looked twice as beautiful as when I'd first seen her. "That's right, I'm leaving town."

"But I thought—"

"I told you, 'no.'"

"I'd hoped you would change your mind."

"Sorry. That's something I seldom do."

She looked like she would cry. She held out a paper to me.

"What's this?"

"A man left it at the hotel. It's from my husband."

"Oh?"

"Read it."

I took the paper. It was a ragged piece of brown wrapping paper, and the writing on it was in pencil. The message read:

My darling Hilda:

Received your letter today, and was happy to hear from you and to know that you are coming out here at last. But you will have to stay in Hays City for the time being. I have had an accident and am laid up with a broken leg, and so can't come to get you. I sure need you here, but I don't know how to get you down from Hays. There's no man around here I can trust to send for you. If you can find someone trustworthy in Hays, you have my permission to hire him to bring you to me. I've missed you plenty, baby, and when you get here. . . .

I skipped the rest of the note, since it was a bit more personal.

I handed the note back to Hilda Larsen, and now there were tears in her eyes.

"Please, Mr. Bannion. . . ."

Hell, I'd never had a woman like her want something of me so much that she would plead with me. I remembered George Payson's scheme for me to pose as a settler, and now it seemed a sound one. The state the woman was in, she would probably agree to going any way I suggested so long as she managed to get to her man.

"I've got to go to him," she said. "He needs me. I've just got to!"

"All right. On condition."

"Oh?" She eyed me warily. "What condition?"

"That you get out of those fancy clothes and into duds more suitable for this part of the country," I told her. "A gingham dress and a sunbonnet. You can buy them here at Jessup's. I'll pick you up at the hotel in an hour. All right?"

There were tears on her cheeks, but her eyes were aglow. "Bannion, I could kiss you!" she said. "I'll be ready in an hour!"

She went into the store.

And I want to buy a wagon that would pass as a settler's rig.

We got away from town at sundown, Hilda riding with me behind the sorrel I'd bought for a pack-animal and a roan that I'd bought later. The wagon was a small rig, canvas-covered, old and rickety, and I'd bought it from a man who'd come West a year ago to settle in Hays. I had no cow tied behind it; I wasn't going to that extreme. I had my big gray gelding tied to the tailgate; I figured that I might need a good mount before I came back out of the Neutral Strip. My saddle was stowed inside, along with my campgear and provisions and the woman's luggage. If anybody got a look inside that wagon, they were going to wonder what kind of settlers we were without household furnishings or farm implements. Then too, I hadn't disguised myself. I wasn't going to shave, and so in a few days I'd look pretty seedy, but I wasn't going to change into bib-overalls and clodhopper shoes. I did wear my old corduroy coat and a faded pair of levis, however, and so I didn't look too prosperous—and I sure wouldn't be taken for a big-city man.

The woman was wearing the right sort of clothes now, but she still didn't look like a hardy settler woman. Soft. That described her. She was a big woman, all-right, but still she had the fragile look of a pampered Eastern woman. I began to wonder how her husband happened to have a ranch in No Man's Land.

I asked her, after we'd traveled a couple miles.

She said, "He inherited it from his uncle."

"So he came out and ran it himself, eh?"

"Yes."

"How long ago?"

"Nine months ago."

I said, "Oh?" and wondered how this Larsen hombre had been able to stand being separated from her all that time. "A long time. No wonder you're eager to get to him. What did Mr. Larsen do before he came west to become a cattleman?"

"He worked in another uncle's hardware store in Philadelphia."

"So you're from Philadelphia, eh? A big city. It'll be lonely for you here."

"Oh, I don't think so."

I QUIT talking, for her short replies made it clear that she wanted to be quiet. She seemed a little tense, and I supposed it was because she was excited about the prospect of rejoining her husband after so long a time. Though with a broken leg, it wasn't likely that he would be much of a husband for quite a while. I slapped at my team with the reins, and kept going toward No Man's Land.

We'd started out late in the day, and, when nightfall came, there was a bright, nearly full moon, so I kept on the move until about ten o'clock. I pulled off the road then, and made camp by a little creek. I took care of the three horses first, watering them and then staking them out. I started a fire and rustled up supper, but Hilda didn't eat much. When I'd cleaned my tin-plate and saw that hers was still three-quarters full, I asked, "Not hungry? Or aren't you used to my kind of grub?"

"I'm sorry, Bannion. I—I guess I'm not hungry."

"Want to turn in?"

"Well. . . ."

I'd thought to buy blankets for her before we left Hays, and I got them from the wagon and spread them midway between the wagon and the fire. She looked at them, then at me. She continued to sit by the fire.

I said, "Look, don't be nervous about me. You're another man's woman, and that makes you as safe with me as if you were back in your bedroom in Philadephia. I'll take a walk while you're turning in."

She glanced around, shivered. "You won't go too far?"

"No. But there's nothing around here to be afraid of."

"It's so—so awfully lonely."

"Yeah," I said, and drifted a little way along the creek. I lighted a cigar, smoked it until it was short, then tossed it into the water and went back to the camp and got my bedroll from the wagon. I spread it out on the opposite side of the dying fire. She was deep in her blankets, only her blonde head, pillowed on an arm, showing. I was thinking that it was probably the first time she'd ever bedded down on the ground when she said, "Bannion?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you do this often? Sleep out like this?"

"Quite a bit. Used to do it a lot more when I was young."

"Haven't you got a wife or—or anything?"

"No wife. No woman at all, right now."

"Don't you get lonely?"

"Lonely as hell, sometimes."

"Why aren't you married, Bannion?"

"Why aren't you sleeping?"

She sat up, ran her fingers through her hair. It was long and thick and wavy, and the moonlight made it look like silver. She tucked the top blanket about her.

"I'm wide awake. I guess I'm nervous."

"Because of me? Or because you're on your way to your husband?"

"A little of both, maybe. Why aren't you married?"

"You've got a one-track mind, eh?"

"What are you, anyway?"

"Used to be a lawman. Before that I was a soldier and a cowhand. Right now I'm nothing but what you hired me for—a guide."

"What are you going to be after you've delivered me to my husband?"

"I've been thinking of going into ranching, if I can get a stake."

"Why?"

"I want to be my own boss, I guess. Yeh, that's it."

"You'll be settled down then, when you're a rancher, and you can get married."

I stared at her. Her bare arms had a satiny sheen in the moonlight. "Look, you're married and you're going to your husband," I said. "But don't think that everybody else should be married. Sure, let the right woman come along and I'll marry her if she'll have me. But for now—"

"What would the right girl be, like, Bannion?"

It began to look as though she would talk all night. So I decided to scare her into shutting up. I said, "If you want to know, one like you, baby. A nice, big, beautiful blonde. Now if you don't go to sleep, you're going to find yourself with a man on your hands—and he won't be your husband."

I got up and walked toward her. She let out a soft shriek and lay back and pulled the blanket up to her chin. I stood looking down at her.

"I'm no wooden Indian, Hilda. Don't throw temptation my way."

"I never—"

"All this talk about me having a wife. It's getting under my skin."

"I was only talking."

"Well, stop talking."

I went back to my bed, sank onto it, took off my coat, hat, gun-rig, boots. I rolled up in my blankets. There was quiet for a few minutes. Then she called my name. I swore, and propped myself up on an elbow.

"What now?"

"I just wanted to say goodnight."

"Goodnight," I said, and swore again under my breath.

I thought I heard her laughing. . . .

NO MAN'S LAND. . . . Thirty-four and a half miles wide, one hundred sixty-seven miles long, the land Congress had overlooked when fixing the boundaries of the western Territories. Kansas and Colorado lay to the north, New Mexico to the west, Indian Territory to the east, and Texas to the south. It was a country of vast plains, but of rough terrain too—towering cliffs, craggy bluffs, deep gullies, wild canyons, brush thickets. There were a few cattlemen on its grass, and in places the homesteader had founded a town or two and turned some of its sod with his plow. But mostly it was a haven for outlaws and outcasts and the riff-raff who followed that breed. . . . It was sometimes called the Neutral Strip too, and sometimes Cimarron Territory.

We crossed over, and followed a mere trace of a road that led southwest. The woman and I: Hilda, who was the wife of a man named Fred Larsen—and Ed Bannion who was beginning to wish she wasn't.

Helping her on and off the wagon, I had to touch her, and, when I touched her, it set me on fire. On the move, she touched my arm to draw my attention to something that caught her eye—an animal, a bird, a landmark—and that was as bad. I'd fallen for her, fallen hard. It had started last night, with her silly talk about why wasn't I married. I'd look at her and want her so bad it hurt.

So I tried not to look at her.

We covered a good thirty miles that day, seeing little along the way. A rider or two in the distance, a freight rig we passed; a cow camp far across the prairie, a couple homestead places with the settlers living in sod houses. That was the only type of house in No Man's Land: sod cut into big bricks for walls and roofs of poles and burlap and dirt. By sundown we were within six or seven miles of Sand Creek, and only two or three from where Sam Meecham's thirty thousand dollars was hidden. If the men who'd jumped him hadn't found it.

The town was to the southwest, close to the Texas line. The cache was due west. I turned off the road, found water after about a half mile. A brush-fringed creek. I didn't help Hilda down from the wagon.

I said, "Stay where you are a little while."

I saddled my gray and rode to a hump of ground about a quarter of a mile away. From atop the rise, I looked in every direction and saw no signs of life. To the west by about two miles was a short range of bluffs running north and south. Beyond the north end of the bluffs was a rock formation with one rock jutting into the air like a church steeple. It was at the base of that steeple rock that Meecham had hidden his money-filled saddle bags. He'd noticed a small crevice in the rock and he'd put the saddlebags into it, then rolled a small boulder in front of the crevice to hide it. All I had to do was search around the base of that spire. Easy. And so far as I could tell, there was nobody but myself and the woman within sight of the rock. I told myself I'd wait until she went to sleep, then go after the money. She wouldn't even miss me.

I rode back to the wagon and she gave me a long, curious look. "Why did you do that, Ed?"

It was the first time she'd called me anything other than Bannion, and she spoke my given name sort of low and husky and intimate. I felt my fool pulse begin to race. I lied, "I wanted to see if I could sight Sand Creek."

I dismounted and went to the wagon and reached up to help her down. She lost her balance, fell against me. I slipped my arms about her, to steady her, and that brought her right against my chest. The next thing I knew my lips were against her mouth. And it was different, better, than it had ever been for me with another woman. She responded too. She seemed to want it as badly as I did. She more than responded. Her lips were as demanding as mine, and her arms went about my neck and her body strained against mine. She was soft of wild with it for a moment, and it was I who ended the moment.

I put her from me, rough about it. "Sorry, baby. . . . That shouldn't have happened."

She was breathing hard, her breasts rising and falling, and her eyes were bright with excitement. "We're in love, aren't we, Ed?"

"No."

"How can you say that?"

"It's just that I haven't had a woman for a long time and you've been away from your husband too long."

"No!"

"Yes," I said, and turned away to care for the horses and build a fire and rustle up supper.

I needed to keep busy.

How I needed to keep busy!

WE WERE eating supper when the rider passed along the road heading south. At least I was forcing myself to eat and Hilda, looking glum, was just picking at her food. This rider was traveling at a lope. I stood up to take a look, and there was still enough daylight to show me that it was a pinto horse he was riding. A pinto, I thought as he disappeared toward Sand Creek. I'd seen a pinto back at one of those soddies we'd passed this afternoon. The last one, I thought. About five miles back along the road.

Maybe I should have worried about it, but I was too concerned with Fred Larsen's wife to give the rider real thought. She kept looking at me in a sad sort of way, a sulky expression about her mouth. When she put aside her plate and cup, I got her bedroll and spread it out and then, like last night, I walked away from the camp so that she could turn in without feeling that I was watching her. When I returned ten minutes later, she was sitting sort of curled up on the blankets and brushing

her hair. She was in her nightgown. The fire had burned to a heap of embers, but there was still enough hazy dusk to let me see her clearly. I tried not to look at her.

She was still fooling with her hair when I turned in, when I bedded down well away from her. I thought, Damn her! She was deliberately making things tough for me. Any woman could get a rise out of a man by letting him see her taking care of her hair, and she knew that. I was beginning to suspect that she knew all the clever little tricks a woman uses to get to a man. I lay on my left side, my back to her. Tomorrow I'd deliver her to her husband, and it would be good riddance. And I'd be lonely as hell.

"Ed. . . ."

I didn't answer.

"Ed, what are we going to do about it?"

"You'll forget me when you get to your husband."

"Ed, I don't want to forget you. Ed, I—I want something to remember you by."

I had to grit my teeth. I'd always hated the guts of any man who stole another man's woman, and here I was wanting to take Fred Larsen's wife. I forced myself to lie still, and after a while I heard her crying.

After a long time she was quiet, and I felt relieved. I lay there for another hour, waiting until she was sound asleep. But then, just as I was about to go saddle my horse, I heard riders. Judging by the sound, they were a lot closer to my camp than the road—and I didn't doubt for a second that they were heading my way. I remembered that rider on the pinto high-tailing it toward Sand Creek. I sat up and pulled on my boots, then reached for my gun-rig. I pulled the six-shooter out of the holster and put it inside my shirt. By that time the drumming of hoofs was loud enough to wake Hilda.

"Ed!"

"Yeah. I hear them. Take it easy. Stay under your blankets."

It was moonlight, and I could see them now, three of them. There'd been five the night Sam Meecham was jumped and he'd gunned down two; here were the other three, and I didn't like the odds. If any of them had ever seen Ed Bannion, ex-lawman, they wouldn't be fooled for a minute that I was a homesteader. They slowed to a walk, one calling out, "Hello, the camp!"

I cursed them under my breath. One was riding a pinto, all right. I saw how they worked it. They'd built a soddy back along the road, close to the place where they figured Meecham must have hid his money, so that they could keep an eye on whoever traveled that way. They'd been expecting Meecham to make a try for the thirty thousand. Maybe they knew he was laid up in Hays and figured he would send somebody. I wished now that somebody was somebody other than Ed Bannion. I wished too that Hilda wasn't with me. I'd found out that she wasn't too straight, but I'd never forgive myself if she came to harm.

They were close now. "Hello, the camp!" The voice was demanding.

I stood up. "What do you want?"

They drifted in, abreast, reined in about twenty feet from me. The man on the pinto leaned forward in the saddle, peering at me. I was shadowed by the wagon, but they were in the moonlight and a tough looking trio they were.

"We're lawmen, and we're looking for an outlaw," the hardcase on the pinto said. "You and your woman alone?"

I could have called him a liar, knowing that lawmen didn't come into the Strip—that this trio just needed an excuse to look me over. "I'm alone," I said. "Except for my missus."

"Nobody in your wagon?"

"No. Take a look, if you like."

I didn't want them to take a look. Finding the wagon empty, they would know I was no homesteader. But my seeming willingness to have them look fooled them, as

I'd hoped. They stayed where they were, the spokesman saying, "Where you from, mister?"

"Missouri."

"Where you bound?

"South of Sand Creek. Aim to homestead."

They exchanged glances, trying to make up their minds about me.

Finally the man on the pinto said, "We'd better have a look at him." He lifted his voice. "Throw some brush on your fire, mister."

I didn't like it, but I did as they told me. The brush didn't catch from the embers, so I got my hat and fanned a little until the flames started. Then I put on the hat, tipped it low over my eyes. It and my three-days' growth of stubble might disguise me enough if any of them had ever seen me before. They stared at me in the flickering light of the fire, then I saw one of them looking at Hilda. A hungry look grew in his eyes.

"That's a mighty good-looking woman you've got, mister."

"Jake, quit it," the man on the pinto said. "Lay off."

"Mind your own business, Blackie," Jake said, and got down off his horse.

I glanced at Hilda. She was sitting up, holding a blanket about her modestly enough, but some women—and she was one—didn't need to show much of themselves to bother a man. I moved fast, coming between her and Jake.

"Get out," I told him. "Get on your horse and clear out."

He laughed and drew his gun and swung it at me. I got my left arm up just in time to keep the barrel from clubbing me in the face. The blow caught me on the forearm with such force, though, that I was knocked reeling backwards, my arm feeling broken. I deliberately let myself fall, then, moaning, I rolled over onto my stomach with my right arm under me—and my right hand going inside my shirt. Jake didn't come after me. I heard Hilda scream then.

I rolled over and heaved to my feet, jerking my hidden gun out. Jake had grabbed the blanket away from her, flung it aside, and now he grabbed her by the shoulder. I yelled at him. So did Blackie and the third man. They yelled a warning. I yelled what Jake was—and it wasn't pretty.

He swung around, his gun still in his right hand. He jerked it up, fired.

Too fast.

I drove my shot into him, then swung my gun toward the other two before his body hit the ground. Both of them had their guns out. I stood my ground, determined to shoot it out with them.

CHAPTER THREE

The Missed Train

SEVEN or eight shots blasted, but only two were mine. My first found its mark, drew a scream from the hardcase whose name I hadn't heard. It caused him to reel in the saddle, to drop his gun. Then he got his balance, and hauled on his horse's reins, racked the animal with his spurs, raced away in wild flight. While he was wheeling away, I drove a shot at the one on the pinto—Blackie. I missed, but he lost his nerve and dropped his gun and held his empty right hand high. His horse spooked and bucked. I ran at him and grabbed his rifle from its boot, threw it aside. He got his horse under control while my six-shooter stared him in the face.

"Now get down," I ordered, "and take that fool Jake away from here!"

He got down and went to the downed man, walking on wobbly legs. I'd never seen a man so scared. He croaked, "He's dead!"

I'd known that. "So tie him over his saddle," I said.

I had to give him a hand, for the dead man was heavy and the horse skittish.

Finally, though, we had the body tied onto the animal, and Blackie was mounted and ready to lead it away.

I said, "Don't come back. Your luck won't hold a second time. If I catch sight of you again, I'll pick you off with my rifle before you get within yelling distance. That's a promise."

His eyes grew round. "You! You're no homesteader! You're Ed Bannion!"

He kicked spurs to his pinto, rode away fast.

And no doubt I should have back-shot him, for now he was sure to be back—with enough Sand Creek toughs to take care of me.

I stood there and watched him disappear through the darkness, fear working me over. Then it seemed possible that I would have a little time. Blackie would want revenge on me for killing Jake and wounding the other one, but he would want Sam Meecham's thirty thousand dollars a lot more. So he could play it cagey. He would give me a chance to get the money, then jump me when I started back toward Kansas. He would let me find the cache for him.

Hilda was saying, "Ed—Ed!"

She was close to being hysterical.

I went to her and said, "Get dressed. We've got to get out of here—fast!"

She was like a scared kid. No doubt she'd never seen anybody killed before, and this was a nightmare for her. She didn't rise from her blankets. She just threw herself at me and wrapped her arms around my legs, and I had one time of it getting free of her and calming her.

I said, "We'll be safe enough if we clear out. Now get dressed."

I was lying, of course. I could save myself, maybe; I could saddle my gray, go after the money, then strike out for Kansas—and under cover of darkness have a good chance of getting away. But with her to care for I needed a miracle to keep us safe. I left her and went to hitch up the team. When I had the team hitched, I saddled my gray and tied it behind the wagon. I saddled it because it was probable that I would need it for a quick getaway before too long. I took my rifle off the saddle and put it up on the wagon seat. I helped Hilda up, then went around, and climbed up the other side. I grabbed up reins and whip, and got the team moving. I headed west, running the horses and the wagon bouncing and swaying like crazy.

It didn't take me long to reach the bluffs and the steeple rock just north of them. The team was blowing and lathered by then. And Hilda, badly frightened, said, "Ed, why are we stopping?"

"Never mind. You hold the reins."

I gave them to her and dropped to the ground. I took a quick look along my back-trail, and didn't see any riders. I hadn't expected to see any. I'd figured that Blackie would keep going to Sand Creek, for help. I went to the base of the rock spire, and it was as big around as a fair-sized building was square. Then too, there were boulders everywhere—some of them right against the spire. But Sam Meecham had given me exact instructions, and I had moonlight to show me what I was looking for. He'd hidden the saddlebags at night, when he was seriously wounded; thinking of that, I had the fear that he wasn't too clear about the spot where he'd left the money. The fear increased as I worked my way about the base of the rock, rolling small boulders away from it and not finding any crevice. I went all the way around, but gave most of my attention to the side facing east. Meecham had said the crevice was on the east side. When, after maybe a half hour, I found nothing, it seemed that maybe he'd been confused. I tried the west side, and ten minutes later I found it. A crevice within a crevice; a small one inside a large one. I rolled the boulder aside, grabbed out the pair of saddle-bags, and there was a musical jingle of gold and silver coins. I slung them over my shoulder and

ran back to the wagon. I threw the bags onto the seat, then put a foot onto the hub of the left front wheel to climb up. I froze there, listening—thinking I'd heard a distant sound.

Hilda said, "Ed, what is this?" She was bothered about the saddlebags.

"Quiet!"

I listened but heard nothing, yet I had a feeling that we weren't alone. I turned from the wagon, looked about in every direction. I didn't see any moving thing, but still the feeling that somebody was around, not too far off, stayed with me. I told myself I was just jumpy. But logic told me that if there was nobody looking for me right now, there would be before long.

I turned to Hilda. "Can you ride a horse?"

"What?"

"Damn it, can you ride a horse?"

"Yes. At least, I rode a few times while I was at Dodge."

"All right. We're going to leave the wagon here. Once I've turned you over to your husband, he can send somebody after your luggage. We've got to travel faster than this wagon can go. I'll ride one of the other horses bareback and you can have my gray. . . . Come on!"

I UNHITCHED the team, then made a *bosal* of the catch-rope I carried on the gray's saddle and put it on the roan. The roan didn't like it any, but I had to have some way to control it and if a *bosal* worked for Indians, it would do for me. I put the money-filled saddle-bags on the gray, then helped Hilda mount. She wasn't dressed for riding astride, but it was no time to worry if her legs showed a little.

"Listen," I said. "If anything happens and I don't get to your husband's ranch, you see that those saddlebags get to Sam Meecham in Hays City. You understand?"

She nodded.

"Sam Meecham."

"I'll remember, Ed."

I got my rifle from the wagon, then went to the roan. I was about to throw myself onto its back, Indian-fashion, when it hit me. Hit me hard. I turned to her, crazy mad.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing, Ed. I didn't say a word."

"You said that you'd ridden a few times—where?"

"Why, at Dodge. I—"

She shut her mouth tight, stared at me with her eyes growing round with fright. I'd been slow in catching her slip, and she'd been so excited that she hadn't realized that she made one. She knew now, though.

"Dodge!" I said. "Why you little liar, you! You conniving, double-crossing—"

I jumped at her and pulled her off my horse and threw her—yeah, threw her—to the ground. She cried out, landing. Then called, "Ed—!" as I swung onto the gray. I was going to ride out and leave her, but she began to sob. I swore. I booted my rifle and dismounted. I stood over her, still mad enough to beat the hell out of her.

"Spill it," I said. "Explain yourself, Mrs. Fred Larsen from Philadelphia!"

"Don't leave me here, Ed! I'm scared!"

"Yeah. Take me along, Ed—and get yourself murdered!"

"No! Take me back with you, back to Hays!"

"Not to your husband now?"

"There is no husband, Ed."

"Now we're getting some truth. Go on."

She looked up at me, tears glistening on her cheeks. "I—I'm in love with you."

"Sure. Thirty thousand dollars worth." I reached down, grabbed her by the hair, forced her to look me in the eyes. "My good friend, George Payson, put you up to it, didn't he? He wrote to me, offering me some big money quick, then went to Dodge to get you in on the scheme—figuring I'd be chump enough to go for his deal. When I did, he wired you and you came to Hays

and went to work on me. Is that right?"

"Yes. . . . Yes, Ed."

"And that note that was supposed to have come from your husband?"

"George wrote it. He was afraid you wouldn't take me with you."

"Why you—why a woman?"

She was crying without sound, tears streaming down her cheeks. Tears of fear. She was terrified that I'd leave her there. That was all. She didn't feel any remorse. I kept my hold on her hair.

She said, "He thought you wouldn't be suspicious of a woman. But he said I would have to be clever to fool you. I didn't like it, Ed. I didn't want to do it. But I was stranded in Dodge and—well, there was only one other way I could get money and I couldn't bring myself to do that. George told me he'd give me a thousand dollars. It seemed like a fortune, so. . . ."

"So you jumped at it," I said. "What are you to George?"

"Nothing. I was working in a restaurant when I first saw him. As a waitress. A dollar a day. I would never have gotten money enough to go back East."

"What were you doing in Dodge, anyway?"

"I was with a show troupe. The manager couldn't get more bookings after we'd played a week at the Lady Gay. So we were stranded."

"An actress?"

"No. A dancer. I'll be truthful with you, Ed. Now, I will. Honest."

"How was George to get the money away from me How were *you* to get it?"

"I don't know. He just said that all I had to do was to get you to Fred Larsen's ranch. He thought you'd pick up the money on the way. If you didn't, he would have somebody follow you when you left Larsen's. He said that he would meet me there and see that I got safely back to Hays."

"So he's going to be at Larsen's ranch, is he?"

"I—I guess so."

"Baby, we're going to Larsen's."

"But—"

"You heard me. Come on."

I caught her under the arms, lifted her to her feet. She fell against me. Her arms went around my neck.

"Ed, I meant it. I'm in love with you. Don't go there, please!"

"Listen, if there's anybody in this world I want to see right now, it's George Payson. We're going, baby, and nothing you can say or do will change it."

"You'll be killed!"

"All right. So you can hold a wake for me."

I pulled her over to the gray and put her on it again.

I mounted the roan, then caught up the gray's reins and moved out with Hilda sobbing. Somehow, I had to find Larsen's ranch in a hurry—while it was still dark. How I was going to find it, I didn't know, but find it I would. And if George Payson wasn't there, I'd sure wait until he showed up—with a cocked gun in my hand!

I COULDN'T ride bareback like a Comanche, but I traveled at a steady lope until after about a half hour I spotted lights in the distance. They were the lighted windows and doorways of Sand Creek, I supposed, and that was a town I had to avoid. It was southeast of us by a mile or more, so I didn't need to do any circling. We kept going until I had to glance back over my left shoulder to see the lights. Then I reined in, and pulled the gray alongside my roan.

"Did George tell you exactly where the Larsen ranch is?"

Hilda had stopped crying, but her voice was choked-up when she said, "All I know is that it's south of Sand Creek. George told me that you'd find it. Ed—"

"Yeah?"

"Please let's go back."

"How far south?" I asked. "Did he

say? Hilda, I tell you we're going."

"I think he said a couple miles. Ed—"

"Never mind," I said, and started out again.

I swung east, thinking I might hit a road that would lead to the ranch. I found one. A trace of a road. Wheel ruts, hoof marks. After I'd followed it for about two miles, I saw a light ahead. I looked at Hilda.

"What's to happen when I ride in with you—and the money?"

"I—I don't know, Ed."

"George told you what to do and say, didn't he?"

"He said that the man there would ask me how the trip from Philadelphia had been. If you had the money, I was to tell him the trip was fine. If you hadn't got the money, I was to say that it was a tiring trip. That's all, Ed."

"All right. You say that it was a fine trip. You savvy?"

"Ed, don't go there!"

I didn't answer that.

We went on, aiming for the light. I was forewarned, and so I should be able to handle the man. But it was George Payson I wanted to settle with, and I was convinced by now that he would be at the place. He'd be eager to get his greedy hands on the money. Then too, he'd not trust his partner—Fred Larsen, if that was the man's name—with thirty thousand dollars; he'd fear a double-cross. It was possible for him to have reached the ranch ahead of me and the girl, even though, to keep from being spotted by me, he had come by a way other than a road we'd traveled. Yes, my friend George was waiting for me—for the money.

It wasn't long before I could see the buildings. A sod house and a sod barn with a pole corral to one side. The light was a lantern hanging above the barn entrance. I had a hunch that the lantern had been left burning because Payson and his partner figured the girl and I might arrive tonight. It would lead us to the place, and it would give them light to shoot by. I had no doubt that I was marked for death. Payson couldn't afford to just take the money at gun-point. He knew that I'd never let him get away with it. Yes, I was to be killed—they figured.

I reined in at the edge of the ranchyard, called, "Hello, the house!"

The door opened at once, proof enough that they'd been waiting there in the dark soddie for us. A big, bearded man appeared and called, "Who's there?"

"This Fred Larsen's ranch?"

"Yeah."

"I've brought Larsen's wife down from Hays."

"The hell you did! Say, that's a good one." He let out a bellow of laughter. "I don't know who the joke's on—you or Fred, mister. But he ain't here. He set out by wagon only this afternoon, heading for Hays to get his missus!" He laughed again, one big, happy, ornery cuss.

He was Fred Larsen, of course. He was claiming that Larsen was gone to Hays because of that note about a broken leg keeping Larsen from coming to meet his wife. George Payson was here, all right. He'd told Larsen just what to say. They didn't want me to wonder about a broken leg and get suspicious.

Larsen said, "Come on in, folks, and make yourselves at home. Me, I've sure been looking forward to meeting Fred's wife!"

I thought, I'll bet you have! I had an idea it would have been rough on Hilda, because of this hardcase, if I hadn't caught onto the scheme. It might still be rough on her, if I got the worst of the showdown. This loud-mouthed hardcase was probably some outlaw that Payson had once had for a client back in Hays, and he no doubt had fewer principles than Payson had when he saw a chance to get hold of thirty thousand dollars. I rode forward after giving Hilda the gray's reins. She

followed, a little behind me and off to my right.

Larsen stared at her. "A real beauty, Mrs. Larsen. Yeah, Fred sure did himself proud when he married you. How was the trip out from Philadelphia?"

"It was fine, thank you." Her voice was shaky. "Just fine."

Larsen looked at me, grinning hugely. "Well, that's nice to hear. Step down, mister, and help the lady to dismount."

He'd got the signal and knew that I had the money. If he wondered why I was riding bareback, he showed no sign. And if he noticed the rifle in my right hand, it didn't seem to bother him any. I swung my horse sideways to him before I slid from its back, so that it shielded me from him. He stood there with his thumbs hooked in the belt of his gun-rig. I lay my rifle on the ground, walked past my roan toward the girl. This put my back to him. I watched her face. She was looking at Larsen. When I saw her eyes widen and her mouth open to cry out, I moved fast.

I DROPPED flat to the ground, and Larsen's slug barely missed me. In fact, it tore at my coat. The blast of the shot was still in my ears when I heaved over in a roll, grabbing out my gun. A second slug kicked dirt into my face. I came to my knees before he could fire again, and drove a shot at him. He yelped. But I'd only creased him. He recovered, his left hand held against his left side, where my shot had grazed him, and fired again. But I threw off him aim once more by moving fast. I came to my feet, but he spoiled my next shot by whirling away and running toward the barn.

I shouted, "Get away from here, Hilda!"

She was turning the gray away when I drove another shot at Larsen. Another miss. He gained the side of the barn, disappeared. I turned, grabbed up my rifle, sprinted for the side of the sod house. Once behind cover, I holstered my six-shooter and levered a cartridge into the Winchester's firing chamber. I peered around the corner of the soddie, and Larsen fired at me. I backed away, went around the rear of the house. It had three blind sides. That was fine for me, for the lack of windows and doors would keep Payson from plugging me from behind. Gaining the other front corner of the house, I took a kneeling position and jerked my rifle to my shoulder. I'd just beaded Larsen when he saw me. He shouted an oath, swung his gun toward me. We fired together.

Give me a rifle any time. . . . The range was just a little long for a hand-gun and Larsen's slug thudded into the sod wall an inch or two from my head. But my .30-30 slug found its mark. Larsen cried out, fell away from the barn wall, dropped his gun, sprawled on his face. He didn't move again.

I moved around the corner, faced the door, jacked another cartridge into the chamber. "All right, George! Come on out!"

"Ed! Ed, listen!"

"I hear you, friend."

"A deal, Ed. We'll split the money!"

"George, you're making me sick to my stomach."

"Fifteen thousand dollars for you, Ed. Why, that's a fortune!"

"Yeah. . . .And to hell with crippled old Sam Meecham, eh?" I cursed him. I told him what kind of a friend he was, what kind of a man he was. Then I yelled, "Come out of there, or I'm going to start shooting in at you!"

It was then that Hilda screamed, "Ed—Ed, help me!"

She'd pulled back beyond the pale glow of the lantern, and I could barely see her. But there was another rider over there. I heard her cry out again, then saw her fall from the gray. The rider had knocked her from the horse. I knew who he was: Blackie. Yeah. . . .I could see that his horse

was a pinto. He'd not gone to Sand Creek with Jake's body. He hadn't bothered to get help. He'd turned back after riding out of sight of my camp, then followed me and the girl when we broke camp and pulled out. He'd seen me get the money, or had guessed I'd gotten it when I stopped by the bluffs. So he'd followed us here, and now was making his bid for the thirty thousand. I forgot about George Payson and ran across the yard. Blackie tried to catch up my gray by the reins, but the animal was spooked and shied away from him. I halted and swung up my rifle.

"Hold on, Blackie! You're not taking that money!"

He got hold of the gray's reins, shifted them to his left hand, then pulled his gun with his right. He should have learned his lesson back there at my camp, but he hadn't. He drove a wild shot at me, and so I let him have it. He was spilling from the saddle when George Payson fired at my back.

I heard the shot the same instant something clubbed me in the left side. I was staggered. My knees buckled. I recovered my balance somehow, forced myself to turn around. He was about to shoot me again, then he saw my rifle beading him and his nerve broke. He dropped his gun, threw up his hands.

"Don't shoot, Ed! I'm unarmed!"

I cursed him once more, knowing that I should kill him not only because he rated it, but also because he'd get me yet if I let him live. But I couldn't kill him in cold blood. I dropped my rifle, stood swaying. A red-hot branding-iron seemed to jab into my side. I was bleeding badly. I took off my neckscarf to wad it against the wound. It was then that Payson thought he had a chance.

He stooped, reaching for his gun.

Hilda cried, "Ed!" But I didn't need the warning. I got my gun out, dazed though I was, before he could bring his to bear. I didn't give him another chance to beg off, but gave him what he deserved.

And one shot was enough.

I MADE it back to Hays City, with Hilda's help.

Before we set out, we went into Larsen's soddie and lighted the lamp and patched up my wound. It was a thing of torn flesh and nicked ribs, not too serious. I took

TINHORN'S LAST GUN-GAMBLE

By George C. Appell

To Godbee's Wells they came, the broken, the outcast, the forgotten . . . and either died unnoticed, or swapped their guns and their lives for a sorry joke. But the stranger who called himself Currie wasn't easy to kill . . . and the only man's gun he wore was his own!

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the saddle off Blackie's pinto and put it on my roan, and we rode back to where we'd left the wagon. It was dawn when we got there, and we went into camp for the day. I slept most of the time, weak and done in, and she did the cooking and, though it wasn't necessary, kept watch in case some No Man's Land hardcases should happen along. Then at sundown, I hitched up the team—the sorrel hadn't drifted far from the wagon and was easily caught—and then headed north again.

When we reached Hays, I dropped Hilda and her luggage off at the hotel and then left the wagon and horses at the livery stable. Carrying the saddle-bags, I went first to Dr. Clayton's office and had him work over my wound and then, once it was properly cared for, I walked on still wobbly legs to Mrs. MacGregor's boarding-house and gave the bags to Sam Meecham. He paid me my ten per-cent, and I told him all about the trip and how George Payson had double-crossed us.

Finally Meecham said, "Ed, I'd like it if you'd take me home to my ranch in Texas and stay there with me—as my partner. What do you say?"

There was only one thing I could say, since no man had ever had a better offer. "We'll start out whenever you say the word, Sam."

We sealed the partnership deal with a handshake.

I went over to the National House, and found that she was registered as Miss Hilda Swensen and was in Room Twelve—only two doors away from my own room. I knocked, and, when she opened the door, I thought she was twice as beautiful as when I'd first seen her. A big, beautiful blonde. I walked into her room without speaking, and I didn't say a word as I counted out a thousand dollars in gold pieces onto the bed—lightening my pockets by a third. I walked to the door, opened it.

"That's to take you back East and help you get a fresh start," I told her. "The eastbound train gets in at four-ten this afternoon. Be on it."

I turned away.

She yelled after me, "Ed, I meant it! I'm in love with you!"

I closed the door, went to my room.

I stretched out on the bed, thinking of the break Sam Meecham was giving me and thinking too how tough it was that she was no good. I loved that Hilda. I wanted her for my woman. But I couldn't afford her, even now that I was to be a Texas cattleman. I knew her kind. There was no limit to such a woman's wanting things. And I couldn't trust her. A woman like that. . . . She'd find a way to get the things she wanted, and that way might mean double-crossing me—even if she did claim to be in love with me. No, I couldn't afford or trust her.

I dozed off, and when I woke, I knew I had to have her.

I looked at my watch, and it was four-twenty—past train time.

I felt sick, knowing I'd never see her again.

I put on my hat and coat, left my room, went down to the street. A far-off sound made me start. A train whistle.

It could have been freight, but I was hoping that it was the eastbound coming in late. I headed for the station, running as best I could. It was the eastbound, and it beat me there. But I reached the platform just as she was about to go aboard. I grabbed her, swung her around, so out of breath I couldn't talk.

The conductor bawled, "All aboard!"

"Ed, let me go! I'll miss my train!"

"Look, don't go!"

"But you said—"

"Look, just stay," I blurted out, "and I'll marry you!"

She didn't say another word about missing her train, and the strange thing was I knew, as she came into my arms, that I could afford her.

And trust her. ★ ★ ★

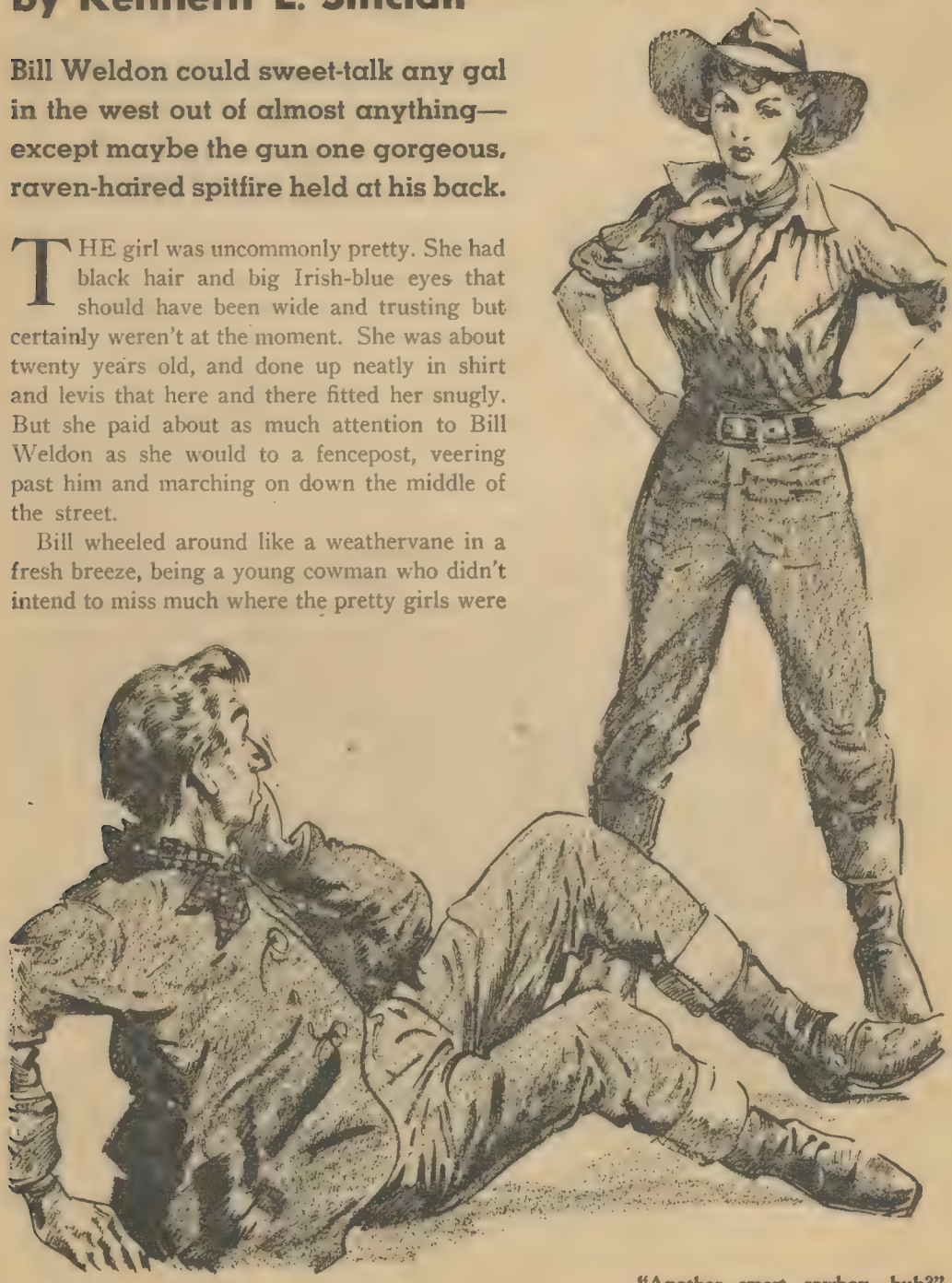
One Woman Town

by Kenneth L. Sinclair

Bill Weldon could sweet-talk any gal in the west out of almost anything—except maybe the gun one gorgeous, raven-haired spitfire held at his back.

THE girl was uncommonly pretty. She had black hair and big Irish-blue eyes that should have been wide and trusting but certainly weren't at the moment. She was about twenty years old, and done up neatly in shirt and levis that here and there fitted her snugly. But she paid about as much attention to Bill Weldon as she would to a fencepost, veering past him and marching on down the middle of the street.

Bill wheeled around like a weathervane in a fresh breeze, being a young cowman who didn't intend to miss much where the pretty girls were



"Another smart cowboy, huh?"

concerned. This one, he noticed now, had her hat tilted down at the front. Her tanned chin was thrust out, and her scarred boots kicked sand from the drifts that had blown across the street. She hollered, "Hey, you!" to a handsome, redheaded cowpoke who was headed for the saloon.

The cowpoke stopped and looked around as if wishing for something to hide under. The girl marched up to him and said, "Thought it was funny, didn't you?" He opened his mouth but didn't get a chance to say anything. The girl's right hand made a small fist that hauled back and then thumped against the man's nose.

He sat down in the dust, suddenly, and put a hand over his nose and complained, "Now, Miss Tess! You shouldn't ought to have done that."

"Ha! I hope I busted something! I know what you were up to last night, keeping me on my porch with your mouth-harp music and your sweet talk, while those other no-good cowboys doctored my well. I found an empty red-pepper can where they threw it in the brush. A five-pound can! You're the big joker around here, Lou—I'll bet you laughed your head off about it afterward. Well, I've just bought some rock-salt for my shotgun, and the next fool cowboy that I catch in my town—"

The redhead took his hand from his nose and used it to shove himself up to his feet. Bill Weldon started forward. Bill wasn't much of a man for getting mixed up in other people's quarrels, particularly any between a man and his girl. But this one was a nose-puncher—who seemed riled enough to do something rash. Bill slipped up to the girl quietly and grabbed her arms from behind.

"Try sweet-talkin' her some more, cowboy," he advised. "Generally that calms 'em down."

The redhead gave Bill a startled look, as if he were thinking, Stranger, you don't know what you've grabbed onto. The gal writhed suddenly and brought a boot-heel against one of Bill's shins and spun away from him. Her man-style hat had gone askew and a wave of raven-wing hair fell over one eye. The other glared up at him balefully. "Oh, it does, does it? And who in blazes are you? Oh—" She put her fists to her hips and leisurely looked him over, from boots to Stetson, and said, "Another smart cowboy, huh?"

"Ma'am, I—" Bill was trying to gather his wits, which had taken out for cover someplace else. He heard a sound of running boots, and, when he looked, he saw the redhead sidling away from them. "I made a mistake, seems as though," Bill said.

"You're darn right you did! If you don't learn to keep that long nose of yours out of other people's business you're liable to be wishing you could get a new one." The girl had sparks in her eyes, and she seemed to be taking aim. Bill stepped back, grinning, and tried to watch both her fists at once.

His nose *was* kind of long, but he'd lived with it for twenty-three years, and it seemed a point of pride, right now, to keep it so. And though he'd known a number of pretty girls, this one offered certain hazards. Being a cowboy, Bill liked things risky now and then—he pulled off his hat and mentioned his name.

"I don't give a hoot who you are," the pretty girl said. "You just better stay away from my town. From now on it's open season on cowboys up there." She tilted her chin up towards the mountains. "It's right at the top of the pass."

Bill frowned and said, "Why, I just now come through there. Seen some four-legged things that smelled like goats, an' a peculiar-lookin' house. Wasn't ary town, though."

"There is too a town! And what you saw wasn't just a house, it's the Sunrise Hotel, and I won't have any darn cowboy running it down!"

"Way it leaned over," Bill said, "a man'd think it was about to fall down."

The gal seemed to tremble. Her right

fist drew back as if about to strike.

From somewhere behind him Bill heard a bellow of male laughter. It was the redhead's voice, coming from some haven of safety.

Bill wished he were there too. No, he didn't either—the girl was prettier than ever when she was mad.

BILL was rescued, though, by the sudden arrival of two more men. One of them drove up in a buggy and got down and took the girl's arm, saying, "Now, Miss Tess, you mustn't let things upset you so." He was a slab-faced man of about thirty, with a long broadcloth coat and trimmed sideburns. The girl leaned on him and said, "Oh, you're always right about everything, Barton. It's just that cowboys make me so darn mad, with their crazy doings. . . ." She helped herself to the handkerchief in Barton's breast pocket and dabbed at her eyes.

The other new arrival was a high-stepping little oldster with a brocaded vest and a wing collar. "Well, well, Miss O'Ryan," he said. "I notice you're still coming down to ol' Cowtrack when you need to buy something. Is that whoppin' big general store up at your town all sold out of stock?" He slapped his thigh and laughed as if he expected everybody to join in.

The gal stamped her foot. "Funny," she said bitterly. "You men all think you're so darn funny. You won't laugh so easy, Sam Bragg, when Sunrise gets going and this place of yours dries up and blows away with the sand."

"Now, Miss Tess," the man with the sideburns said again, putting an arm about her shoulders and starting her toward his buggy. "We'll pick up your saddlehorse and get out of this graveyard."

"Simms," the oldster barked, "you're a traitor to the town that's fed you, an' if you get any more legal business in Cowtrack it'll be a plumb surprise to me."

Sideburns looked around, smiling as though the possibility didn't alarm him much. "On the kind of half-hearted wrangles you old fossils get into, a lawyer'd starve to death. I'm banking on Sunrise, the town with a future."

"It ain't got anything else!" Bragg snorted.

There wasn't any answer to that. The lawyer helped Tess into his buggy, being unnecessarily careful to see that she didn't fall, and got in on the other side. When they drove away the girl looked around just once, straight toward Bill, her eyes wide and suddenly alert and something that had just occurred to her had surprised her somewhat. Lovely eyes, they were. Bill made a couple of tries before he could swallow again.

Bragg was scowling at him. "Now there's a filly you want to watch out for, stranger," he said.

"Seems like a man ought to. Is she a little, well— What I'm gettin' at is, she claims there's a town up there in the pass, an' I sure didn't see none when I come through awhile ago."

"Nope. There ain't any town an' there ain't goin' to be any. Gal ain't exactly loco, though—just stubborn an' Irish. What she calls a town is just platted out, throwed slap-dab across the pass. Her pa was Terry O'Ryan, a surveyor. Got the fool notion that a town ought to be high an' healthy, an' bought the land from the government an' laid it out afore he got killed in a stage accident. Streets an' buildin' sites an' whatnot, all measured an' staked an' empty. Wanted us all to close up Cowtrack an' move up there. Figgered that would attract new businesses, an' the place would boom and everybody'd get rich. Fool notion. Gal's still tryin' to shove it along."

"She's got a little help there, I noticed."

"Barton Simms? He don't weight the scales any. Two-bit lawyer. Done a little work for me, drawin' up deeds an' such, but he ain't goin' to get any more of it to do. His goin' up there is a case of a man gettin'

roped by a pretty face, I reckon." Bragg hooked his thumbs in his vest pockets and inspected Bill. "What's your business here?"

"Cows," Bill said. "I got a herd on the far side of the pass, an' my orders is to deliver 'em over here to any hombre by name of Cooley. Drifted over to find out just where his place is at—them critters is wild and ringy, an' once they get to runnin' they're hard to turn."

Bragg seemed suddenly pleased about something. He gave Bill a cigar, and bit off the end of one for himself. "By damn," he said, lifting his eyebrows. "Cooley's talked of drivin' a herd through that fool town, knockin' survey stakes over an' likely topplin' over that slice of a hotel the gal's got."

BILL nettled up a little. "Sounds like rough treatment for a gal, even if she is a nose-puncher. What's that rancher got against her?"

Bragg chuckled. "He come off second-best in a ruckus with her pa, an' he ain't the kind to forget it. Besides, him an' the other cattlemen have always drove their cows through there, goin' to an' from summer range."

"Ain't there any other way for 'em to go?"

"There is, an' they've took it the past couple years. But it's a long ways around. So they sicced their cowboys on her. Nothin' serious, you understand—just run off her goats a time or two, things like that. Last night, I hear, they red-peppered her well." Bragg chuckled some more. "That ought to make the place too warm for her!"

"Five-pound cans of red pepper," Bill said, "ain't easy to come by. Storekeeper here must of got it for 'em special. I reckon he's an accommodatin' cuss, when it comes to somethin' that'd hinder a town that might get to competin' with him."

"Bein' the owner of the store here," Bragg said, smooth as grease on a griddle, "I ain't goin' to deny that. Town that's fightin' for its life ain't goin' to worry how it goes about pryin' loose a fool female. Offered her a job in my store, after her pa died. She'll come down to takin' it yet." He flipped his vest open, revealing a big and shiny star. "I'm sheriff here too, happen so. Undertaker also, as a sideline." He squinted at Bill. "Seems like an up-an'-comin' young feller like you ought to be lookin' for a ranch of his own. We got a couple of 'em for sale—"

"Not interested," Bill said. "Only cows I'm concerned about right now are them wildies my boys are holdin' on the other side of the pass."

"Well, you got to drive 'em through Sunrise to get 'em here," Bragg said, looking very pleased.

"I don't have to do a solitary thing I don't want," Bill said, arching his neck a little. "Where at do I find Cooley?"

"His Circle C outfit is four-five miles north of here, on the other side of the basin. But seems to me he was in the saloon just now, listenin' to how the red-pepperin' worked out."

BIG-WHISKERS Cooley was in the saloon, all right. He was standing at the bar, talking and laughing with a bunch of other stockmen while a percentage girl dabbed horse liniment or something equally smelly on redheaded Lon's nose. Bill had seen Cooley and his bushy black whiskers before, when the Cowtrack rancher came over the mountains to the ranch where Bill worked and bargained for a moderate-sized bunch of cattle.

Ordinary cows wouldn't do, it seemed. Cooley wanted the tough ones, the wise old renegade steers that had evaded the round-ups by taking to the rough country up in the breaks. Because he was an old friend of Joe Enderlin, the owner, he was getting the kind of stock he hankered for, though it had taken the whole crew two weeks to comb the critters out of the brush.

Cooley's eyes lighted up when he saw Bill. He snapped his suspenders and boomed, "Right on time, I see! Step up here, young feller; an' wash the dust from your throat."

"What I got stuck in my craw," Bill mentioned darkly, shoving his hat back on rebellious brown hair, "ain't trail dust exactly. I'm surprised at you hombres, carryin' on like a bunch of ornery younkers. But you ain't ropin' me in on any fight against a woman. I got a notion to turn them cows back an'—"

"Who's fightin' any woman?" Cooley's eyes went round and innocent. "Shucks, the boys've just been havin' a little fun with her, that's all. Sooner or later she's got to come down off that high-an'-mighty notion of plunkin' a town acrost our cattle trail. She'll starve out anyway, up there—we're just doin' her a favor, like, by pryin' her out before she gets hungry."

"Bein' as how I hanker to keep my nose like it is," Bill said, "I ain't goin' to help you with that kind of favors. I hear there's a long way around, so if you'll show me where it's at—"

"No, you don't!" Cooley took a folded paper from his shirt pocket and slapped it to the bar. "What you're goin' to do is all wrote down here in the contract. You're to drive 'em through Sunrise Pass an' deliver 'em not later than the fourteenth, which just happens to be day after tomorrow. Leaves you no time for circlin' around her. I been put to considerable expense buyin' them critters—all the cows around here is so all-fired tame they'd stop in their tracks if she hollered boo at 'em—an' I aim to see this job done proper."

"That pass is plumb narrow," Bill objected. "If I was to—"

"Ain't it, though?" Cooley's teeth gleamed among his whiskers, and he aimed a stubby forefinger at Bill. "You got your chore cut out for you. Now hop to it, else I'll see that Joe Enderlin fires you pronto!"

It was late evening when Bill rode up through the pass. He'd scouted around Cowtrack Basin to get the lay of the land, and what he'd found hadn't helped him much. The town of Cowtrack was tucked away in a barren side-canyon to the east, and Sunrise Pass entered the basin on the south. After considerable inquiring he'd found a cowboy who was willing to show him where the roundabout trail was; but the thing was so roundabout that it would take a week to drive the steers that way and twice the number of men he had, to keep the old hellions from branching off and losing themselves in badlands.

The moon was up now, round and full, romantically flooding the pass with light. It was a pretty place for a town, all right. Bill's heart swelled and he longed to see Tess O'Ryan again. He wondered if a man could look at her in this moonlight and still keep from prancing around.

What he found in the pass was an old codger with a scrawny neck and a pair of barn-door ears, busily milking a goat that he'd persuaded to stand on a flat-topped rock.

"Howdy," the old-timer said testily. "You're the galoot that rode hellbent through here this mornin', I suspect. Miss Tess mentioned seein' you in town—said you was uncommon nosy, in more ways than one. Name's Weldon, ain't it? Me, I'm Eph Parker, town marshal here. Watch your step, young feller—I'm in a bad mood after spendin' all day cleanin' out that well, an' I'd be liable to clap you in the jail if we had one."

Bill stepped down from his saddle, glancing around at what Parker seemed to consider a town. A tumbleweed went rolling by in the evening breeze and lodged for a minute against a low, weathered little sign that Bill hadn't noticed that morning. The sign said, GENERAL STORE. Another, farther away, said, BLACKSMITH SHOP. And now that he looked for 'em Bill saw corner stakes here and there, all along what seemed planned for a street.

"Job like you've got," he mentioned dryly, "must keep you on the jump all the time."

The marshal chuckled. "I ain't crazy, if that's what you're drivin' at. But when people starts comin' in, the bad ones'll come with the good. Got to be ready for 'em, Miss Tess keeps sayin'. Meanwhiles I keep busy with chores in general, like these here goats."

"Might Miss Tess be around this evenin'?"

"Nope. Her an' Barton Simms, they took his buggy an' drove over to Spring Falls, in a cove that's down from here a ways. Wanted to watch the moonlight on the falls, he said. Hell!" The oldster slanted a sly look at Bill. "You're a likely-lookin' candidate, seems to me. Why don't you tie in an' court her?"

Bill touched his nose and pulled his hand away quickly, and grinned. "Might be I will. But there's somethin' I ought to see her about. Say, why doesn't she give up this town idea?"

"She come mighty near to it, once. But her pa always talked about how the place would boom someday, an' she's sorter sentimental about it. Ol' Terry was a railroad surveyor—they tramped over this whole blamed country, lookin' for the grades they needed, but the road never did get built. He quit his job an' settled here an' throwed together that start of a hotel you see over there but run out of money before he could finish it. Talked about some big surprise he was savin' for Miss Tess, but then that stagecoach tipped over on 'im when he was away on a trip some'ers, so nothin' come of that either.

"She was plain downhearted for awhile, but then Simms took a room at the hotel an' started encouragin' her. If we can just break the ice an' get two-three concerns to move up from Cowtrack, he says, others'll foller an' things'll be rollin' here. Me, I hope he's right but I got suspicious he's just talkin' for a pretty gal's ears. You better decide to polish up an' court her. I'd admire to see somebody head off that slippery law-shark afore it's too late—he's been talkin' weddin' bells to her ever since he moved in here, every chance he gets."

"Right this minute," Bill said, "I've got a bunch of wild steers on my hands." He turned to his horse and mounted. "So long, old timer."

ON A sudden notion, though, he reined close to the hotel as he passed it. Somebody had said that it was a slice of a building, and it certainly was. It seemed intended to be a long, two-story structure like many frontier hotels, but only about twenty feet of the middle of it had gotten built. What there was of it was complete with second story, bob-tailed porch, and section of balcony for the upstairs rooms where lacy curtains showed at the windows. The front of it was made of boards, but the ends were covered with tarpaper secured against the winds by crisscrossed strips of lath.

Those winds that blew up here had been just about too much for the shebang, though. It leaned tiredly to one side and was propped by long poles to keep it from going all the way over. If a herd of wild cattle went through here they'd knock those props loose and likely shove the hotel right on over to make a job of it.

On the porch was a faded sign that Bill hadn't noticed that morning. It read:

WELCOME TO SUNRISE!
Queen City of the Mountain West
PROSPERITY—AMITY—SALUBRITY
(Goat's milk free to all guests)

The way Bill was feeling by now, he wouldn't have been saddened any if Barton Simms foundered himself on that goat's milk. Bill was developing a first-class case of woman trouble—he kept thinking of Tess O'Ryan and the petal-soft look of her lips. Then he remembered the speed and precision of her tanned little fist, and he reckoned, sadly, that the lawyer was too smooth a man to risk getting punched. Besides, it

was cowboys that Tess seemed to have it in for. Maybe she saved up her punches for them.

Feeling plumb bruised, Bill rode out. He passed some big rocks that probably had been dragged away from the building site when the hotel was thrown together, and now were banked with lodged tumbleweeds. The weeds stirred a little in the wind as he passed 'em, and his horse shied away skilfully. And Bill got rough with reins and spurs, which wasn't like him at all.

He jogged on down the other side of the pass, reaching his camp in time to catch Lefty Callahan, the cook, busy wrangling a panful of dirty dishes in a poisonous mood.

"Thought you'd fell off a cliff some'ers," the cook growled. "What'd you do, take a sashay around by Denver an' Cheyenne? The boys is all out tryin' to keep them critters from bustin' away from the bunch an' theirselfs in the brush—won't be any sleep around this camp tonight. When do we get to movin' again?"

"Hard to say," Bill mentioned. "I run into a little trouble."

"Hell! That moony-eyed look you got says it was the kind of trouble that wears curls."

Bill found himself a bait of grub and went out to help close-herd the renegade steers. Toward morning, with the critters finally worn out from milling, he went back to camp and got a little sleep.

He woke up with the toe of a scarred little boot poking him in the ribs. The voice speaking to him was like the music of angels, but the words kind of jarred. "Wake up, now," they said. "Roll out of there pronto, you big bum, and fork it over."

Bill sat up, alarmed by the notion that this must be some new kind of a robbery. The gal who was standing over him, her lips drawn tight and her eyes flashing blue fury, was Tess O'Ryan. She was lovely, though, in the morning sunshine. Over beyond her was Lefty, scowling through the smoke of the campfire. Bill said, "Huh? Fork what over? Cowboys ain't ever got any money, ma'am. So if you're startin' out on a career of crime you'd better—"

"Fork over the briefcase that you swiped from Mr. Simms's room at the hotel last night. Ben saw you go over there, and the room had been broken into and the case was gone. Whatever gave you the fool cowboy notion of stealing a thing like that?"

Bill gulped a couple times. "I never did no such of a—" he began. But then he got a sudden frisky feeling and, figuring that she couldn't get much of a swing at him now, he mentioned, "What I'd like to steal sure wouldn't be no briefcase."

Her cheeks colored up prettily, and the faint quiver of her lips was nearly tempting enough to make Bill jump up and try for the kiss he'd hinted at. But what she said was, "Don't try to change the subject. Did you take that briefcase or didn't you?"

Bill had slept in his clothes, which made it modest for him to stand up as he lifted his right hand. "Word of honor, I never took it."

Right about then Lefty put in, "He sure didn't have no such thing with 'im when he showed up here last night, lady. I've knowed 'im for a long time, an' I'll state that he wouldn't steal nothin'."

Tess's hands unclenched and fell to her sides. "Oh, gosh," she said. "The fat's in the fire for sure, then. Mr. Simms took his buggy and went tearing down to Cowtrack for the sheriff. He said there were valuable papers in that case. If you didn't take them, who did?"

Bill pulled on his boots. "I aim to find that out," he said, suddenly curious about what valuable papers a two-bit lawyer without any clients would have in his possession.

Bill and Tess rode up toward the pass. She rode sure and easy in her saddle; but like most gals she liked to talk. She said, "I can't understand such a thing happening in Sunrise. A burglary, right in the hotel! Poor old Eph doesn't seem to know what

to do about it. We've never had any trouble before, except—" She bit her lip. "Except for the cowboys, of course."

"Cowboys," Bill mentioned, "can be right big of a nuisance."

Her blue eyes darted a glance his way. There was a hint of a smile in them, but then she sobered and stopped her horse. "I'll bet they told you I was crazy, didn't they? Well, I'm not. It's just that I've got to keep believing that Sunrise *will* be a town—it's the only thing I've got to hang onto. Pop dreamed about it so, saying that some day it would be a sort of combined health resort and business town. He always claimed Cowtrack was built in the wrong place, and stayed there out of pure stubbornness. The water down there is awful stuff, and there's nothing but sand all around. . . ."

"Sam Bragg owns considerable of that sand, I reckon. Seems like he aims to keep the town where it's at."

"Oh, Sam's all right. He's just looking out for Sam Bragg, and I don't blame him for that, though it tickles him when Sunrise has trouble. Big-Whiskers Cooley is the mean one. He and Pop had a run-in once. Pop was little, but he'd been a prize-fighter when he was young, and he flattened Big-Whiskers right in front of everybody in Cowtrack. Big-Whiskers never has forgotten that for a minute, and now he's taking it out on me."

The way she blinked, her long black lashes touching velvety cheeks as if to keep back tears, was too much for Bill. His heart swelled up, and he forgot the risks, and he put an arm around her slim waist to comfort her. But then he forgot about that too—because he found himself kissing her. Her rose-petal lips were just as pliant and sweet as they'd looked. . . .

He drew back quickly, glancing warily down at her right hand. But she laughed and put both her arms tight around his neck and kissed him right back. "Oh, Bill!" she murmured.

His heart really began prancing now. But their horses started prancing too, uneasy and looking over toward a brushy draw. Bill heard running hoofs over there, and thought he caught the sound of a man's laugh.

"Hey," he said darkly. "Somebody's sneakin' by, over there—"

"Oh, it's probably some of those fool cowboys—they're always riding back and forth." Tess giggled a little. "I'll bet they saw us. But for a wonder they were gentlemen enough not to hooraw us." She looked at Bill through lowered lashes. "You kiss all the girls, don't you?"

Bill owned up to it. "Yup. Or did, every chance I got. But this is different. Gal, this time I— What I mean is, if you—We—" He bogged down completely.

She pushed a wave of raven-wing hair back from her cheek and smiled at him, radiantly. "I know, Bill. And—and it doesn't take forever for an Irish girl to make up her mind."

WHEN they rode on up the pass, the going was slow. Bill's arm was around Tess's waist, and her head was on his shoulder. His mood was such that he'd have tended goats, if strictly necessary, without noticing their smell. Tess was talking about the future they'd have together, and Bill had forgotten the valuable papers that had been swiped from Barton Simms.

He remembered them again, though, the minute he got near to that hotel. The buggy was coming up from the other side of the pass with Sam Bragg sitting importantly at the lawyer's side. Simms was whipping his team so that the buggy got moving fast, its wheels clearing the ground at every bump. It swerved toward the hotel, cutting right through the middle of the staked-out general store.

Eph Parker's bent little figure appeared suddenly on the hotel's bob-tailed porch. He waved his arms and yelled something.

Bill couldn't hear what it was. All of a

sudden he realized that there was a louder sound in the air—the rumble of many oncoming hoofs. He looked around and saw that the half-wild steers were sweeping up into the narrow pass, filling it from one side to the other.

There was considerable dust behind that fast-moving herd, but Bill caught glimpses of the men who were driving it. They weren't any of his crew. One of them was the redheaded joker whom Tess had set down on his pants in Cowtrack. Some shots were being fired back there in the dust now, to boost the herd to its top speed.

Tess looked wildly toward Bill. He grabbed the reins of her horse and spurred for the hotel.

The buggy had almost reached the building now. But Sam Bragg stood up in the seat and took the lines, swinging the rig around with one hind wheel spinning on air and heading in between the prop-poles to gain the scant shelter afforded by the hotel. Lawyer Simms seemed frozen—he clung to the seat-rail and stared at the oncoming herd.

Bill lifted Tess from her saddle and swung her onto the porch. "But Bill!" she gasped. "They'll knock this place over!"

"Can't outrun 'em, now they've got their tails rolled," he said. He spurred ahead again, taking her horse and his own into shelter beside the buggy team.

He was running back along the porch when Tess hollered, "Bill, where on earth are you going? Bill Weldon, you come back here!"

He didn't answer—no time, he figured. He ran out to the big rocks where the tumbleweeds were piled, got a match going, and touched it to the dry weeds. They flared up like a torch.

By the time he got back to the hotel and jumped over the porch rail the herd was mighty close. But the one thing they were afraid of was fire—the herd split to avoid

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the flames and streamed past on either side of the hotel, not a critter touching the leaned-over structure.

In less than half a minute the herd had gone by. And the cowboys who'd driven them were reining back, looking at each other and cussing things in general. They didn't keep at it long, though. Bill's crew, who'd likely been caught unawares and had had the herd taken away from them by the hombres who sneaked over the pass, came up the hill in a strung-out, angry group.

Tess slipped an arm about Bill's neck. "Oh, Bill, you saved the hotel!"

Eph Parker didn't allow no time for romantic matters, though. He blew out his cheeks and pointed at Barton Simms, who was getting down, shakily, from the buggy. Parker's talk was loud, fast, and pointed as cactus stickers. "Simms," he said, "you're a tinhorn crook. You knowed the railroad was comin' through here after all, an' that Sunrise was to be a division point, an' you was dickerin' with 'em to make yourself the big noise around here, figurin' to get Miss Tess married to you so you'd have legal ownership of the town."

The lawyer stopped in his tracks, his sideburned face gaping. Tess said, "Eph, have you gone loco?"

"I don't think it, I know it," Parker said testily. "I couldn't let things go on the way they was headed, so I busted into that lawshark's room, an' took the case his papers was in."

"But Eph," Tess accused, "you said that Bill went to the hotel after he talked with you!"

"Didn't say he went *into* it, did I?" the oldster mentioned slyly. "Simms was plumb ready to jump to a conclusion, an' it got 'im out from underfoot for awhile. I was havin' me a time with that case. It was locked, an' I didn't want to wreck it gettin' it open because there might be nothin' of importance in it an' I'd have to sneak it back to his room. Worked on it all night, an' just a little while ago got a piece of haywire bent to the right shape to persuade that lock. What I found, though, was plenty. It'll blow the lid off things— Hey, Simms, you come back here an'—"

The lawyer didn't seem inclined that way. He was running out through the town, heading down the pass, his long legs carrying him over stakes and signs that had been kicked every which way and trampled by the running cattle.

"Let him go," Tess said, looking at the stakes. "Oh, dear, I can't afford to have another survey made. . . ."

Sam Bragg had come to the porch steps, where he'd done some mighty quiet listening. Now he cleared his throat like he had something important to announce. At last Bragg said, "Was just wonderin' if we could make a dicker here. I'd be willin' to put up money for the survey in return for an option on some of this Sunrise property. Reckon I'll be movin' my store an' other businesses up from Cowtrack—gets tiresome sweepin' out sand all the time."

Bill had craned his neck to see that the tumbleweed fire was burning itself out without getting near to the tarpaper end of the hotel building. Now he got both his arms around Tess and said, "You see her about that later, Bragg. Might be you can do business with me, too—I'm liable to get interested in one of them ranches you mentioned bein' for sale."

"But Bill," Tess said, "you're going to be awfully busy right here. I mean, Sunrise is going to boom after all, and I'm electing you mayor right now—"

Bill grinned and kissed her, thoroughly. "Irish gal, not even you can keep a cowboy away from cows." She kissed him right back, in a way that said he was bossman from now on.

Sam Bragg had a shrewd eye for business. "Forgot to mention," he said, "that I'm also justice of the peace. Marriages performed at any hour—"

"Wait around, Sam," Tess said. "Just wait around. . . . ★ ★ ★

The girl came closer and whispered in Lou's ear. . . .

Everything had worked out for Ted Brandon until a gunman out of his owlhoot past returned to stalk his town, his woman, and his life!

by Van Cort

• No Man's Lady •

EVEYTHING had worked out for Ted Brandon. At thirty-five he was a handsome, dignified man of importance in Cullen county where he had settled five years before. He owned a small ranch, and he was county sheriff. He was about to become engaged to Hedda Thorberg, one of the most sought-after girls in the little valley. Yes, things had worked out.

As he stood at the bar of the Drover's Hotel with a few friends during the lunch period, a sudden smile, half wistful, came to his face. Looking at the man staring back at him from the bar mirror, he was startled to see such respectability, solid citizenship, and good resolution facing him

from the deep gray eyes and the firm chin. He said silently to the image, "By gad, is that really me, that slightly stuffy-looking hombre in there, that pillar of civic virtue?"

Over the shoulders of the image he saw another vague and slightly blurry figure, wild and reckless-looking, with a slightly cruel drag to the mouth and a to-hell-with-you expression of challenge in the eyes. Behind that figure were wild trails, not very straight ones, and dangerous moments, not too honest ones. Still and all there were none that need cause too deep regret. The blurry shadows vanished, and the first figure stood clear and proud. "Yes, by god," Brandon said again to himself, "this *is* me, and this me I never want to change."

His love for Hedda had helped, of course. He raised the full glass in his hand and said to Joe Dunninger behind the bar, "Joe, I'm going to break this glass against the wall."

The bartender looked briefly at him and then said, quietly, "Okay, Ted; I've got lots of them."

The glass crashed, and Jimmie Luvain and Ray Ortega, ranchers, standing on either side of Brandon, turned to look at him. Luvain, seeing the preoccupied half smile on the sheriff's face, said, "Here's a man making some kind of resolution. Pity the man this sheriff's got his sights set on."

Ortega shook his head, "Nonsense. It's love light I see in his eyes . . . and damned if I blame him. Now if I was ten years younger. . . ."

Brandon looked at first one, then the other. "A beautiful day, gentlemen."

Luvain winked at Ortega, "He's got the world by the tail."

"A fence around it," said Ray.

Ted Brandon then paid and went outside on the gallery, conscious of the lush valley, the lively town, the distant green foothills of the Hussars rising in the west. He felt expansive and light on his feet. This was his little world; here he belonged; the trusted guardian of the law in which he firmly believed. He had ripened into a man.

Then there was a sudden cloud against the sun. A feather of chill sweat, a rash of goose pimples ran over Brandon. A voice from the hitch rail had said, "By Jimminy, I would spot that saddle anywhere a quarter mile away."

Ted Brandon looked at the man, his knee hooked around saddle horn, sitting on a long-legged roan, next to his own black horse. Lou Dexter was still a fashion leader cowboy, his clothes a little too clean, his brown face smooth and long, and his blue eyes still smoky with innocent cunning. There was a tooth missing, but he had had it replaced with gold, and somehow it didn't detract from his appearance. The tall white five-gallon hat was spotless and pushed back on his head.

Brandon felt leaden and silently cursed the Mexican silver-laid piece of artwork he rode in and hadn't been able to divorce himself from. The saddle had been made as if with him in mind. It was one of those things, like a habit you can't get rid of. He'd worn out a lot of horses under it. He said, too evenly, "Well, Lou; seems you're far from home."

"Or maybe close to it. Who knows?"

A shudder went through Brandon. "Been seven years. You haven't changed a bit."

"Is that good or bad."

"Who knows?"

LOU DEXTER bowed smilingly in the saddle and let his leg drop. "Still got your favorite expression: *Quien sabe?* When you were cornered you always said that. Ted, you're a sight for sore eyes. You look good." He slid from the saddle and came across the boards to shake hands with Brandon. In the hand-grip something seemed to sap away from Brandon. He felt naked. A wave of reserve came up in him and he said, "You here on chance or purpose?"

"Just riding through, Ted. Wanted a drink, picked this hotel and saw your saddle on the black. Funny small world, hey."

"Funny, yes."

Dexter made a positive smile and raised an eyebrow. "The man is not overwhelmingly happy to see an old friend."

Brandon shrugged and forced a grin. "I was never one to leaf much back in the book. Maybe that's it."

"It's not a bad book," said Dexter. "A black page here and there. A man skips that. What the hell. Aren't you going to buy me a drink?"

"Of course. We'll go over to the Silver Buffalo there."

Lou looked up and down and around and said with his old, innocent charm, "What's the matter with this place here?"

"As you wish. . . ."

As they turned into the hotel bar, Dexter nudged the star badge. "Look what the man is wearing . . . My god, no wonder you look so solid. I could pick no better company on such a lucky day. . . ."

Ortega and Luvain were still at the bar, and Fenton Thorberg, Hedda's uncle. Brandon introduced Lou around and ordered fresh drinks for the company from Joe Dunniger. In five minutes Dexter was the center of an interested circle, running the conversation. He had his old charm, even more so. He could tell a yarn and knew when to finish it. Brandon watched this self-sure man with increasing uneasiness. Lou was that rare combination of lady's man and man's man; he tempered bluster with a judicious dash of modesty. He could brag and make it good listening; he knew when to stop. The men bought him drinks; he ate of the free lunch with an air that suggested he was doing the hotel a favor. Judge Rowan came across from the courthouse and joined in a drink and a laugh. He liked Lou Dexter at once. "I remember you. Weren't you the Dexter who cleaned up Mesa Valverde?"

Lou shrugged and smiled. "I was marshal there at the time."

Mesa Valverde was a mining camp boom town, now turned ghost. It had had a succession of marshals who had played both sides of the law against the middle as politics demanded. Lou had been one of them.

Rowan said, "You mentioned coming down here sort of looking the job situation over . . . well." He turned to Brandon, "Ted, here's the deputy you've been needing. That's the least we can do for a friend of yours . . . What say you?"

Brandon said nothing at once, while he wondered what Rowan used for brains and how he had ever become a county judge. That was politics for you. He realized too that all these men were fooled by the fact that Lou was supposed to be his friend. Lou himself had thrown a cigaret to the floor while he thoughtfully squashed it with his boot toe. On his face Ted recognized the stiff-cheeked squelching of a smile, as if something had been too damned easy to believe.

It was against Brandon's principles to hire a deputy or any other law-officer unless he and the community both knew him thoroughly, but somehow he felt himself now caught in this circle of friendly, inquiring faces. By gad, they thought they were doing *him* a favor. "Well, what about it, Ted?"

Such were the haphazard foolish ways of fate! Brandon said almost harshly, "All right, what about it, Lou? Interested?" hoping the man would say No.

Lou's face came up. It was flat poker and a little humble. "To tell you the truth, gentlemen . . . yes, in fact I had some such thing in mind. . . ."

The thing was done. Judge Rowan, with his sly-innocent, white-mustached, red puffy face, looking like something out of Dickens, asked Brandon, "Of course, as a matter of form you'll vouch for Mr. Dexter?"

He could hardly afford to hesitate even as the irony bit into him. Was this a world of idiots? He cleared his throat to get over the cornered feeling, "Yes, yes, of course."

"Swear him in tomorrow at my office be-

fore court up end. Joe, set them up. . . ."

LATER when the two men were alone at the livery, getting Dexter's horse boarded, Brandon said sharply, "Lou, you're not serious about staying here as my deputy. That's not the way I run my office. I'll give you three weeks . . . if you take the job at all."

Dexter's blue eyes refused to be read; he made a very grave face, "But you got me wrong, Ted. I want the job. Dead serious."

"Go to hell. An old owlhoot like you? You never change. Don't trade on a marshal's job in a manure pile like Mesa Valverde."

"Owlhoot? So were you."

"I never liked it, never wanted to be. You're different. It's in your blood."

"Speak for yourself." Lou said it with a fine touch of dramatic anger, then added with a shrug, "If we strung out all the cattle you and I stole together it would reach from here to Texas."

"For me that's past and long gone. I,"—Brandon hated the word—"reformed."

There was a light of mockery in Dexter's eyes, then he grabbed that string for his own guitar. "Ted, that goes for me too. Honest Indian. I'm no yearling any longer. I've left the foolishment behind me. I want that job. I want to settle."

This was said with a stone-sober poker face, and a tiny doubt began nagging Brandon. Was he doing Lou an injustice? There was a chance that even wild Lou Dexter, always ready for anything, was growing up. He studied the handsome face and at last shrugged. "Have it your way, Lou. Never let it be said. . . ."

Lou's shoulders lifted; his glance gave the town a once-over with renewed interest. "I'll find myself some diggings. Reardon's saloon and hotel over there look likely. . . ."

Ted Brandon felt ashamed of his feeling of relief. Somehow he did not care to invite Lou to his ranch. Lou was turning away to leave, but suddenly faced the sheriff again, "Oh, by the by, I almost forgot. I could use twenty cartwheels right handy. Been kinda down on my luck lately. Just a passing thing." He held out his hand confidently.

Brandon paid out the money. "On your salary," he said stiffly. Inwardly he was cursing. He watched the other swing around and head down the street. "Saddle-tramp," he said between his teeth. "His kind never change. Never." Lou had the same swing to his shoulders, the same cocky walk he'd always had when he was headed for whatever might-come. A drink, a chance at the faro tables, women. Brandon thought darkly at that last item. Women, usually to their grief, liked handsome Lou Dexter too well.

FENTON THORBERG gave the dance. It was to be a sort of engagement party, Hedda and Brandon had decided. There were barbecue pits and long tables under the cottonwoods and elms in the yard, some handwrestling matches, a good deal of talk, barrels of beer lined up in the shade of the barn, out of which the hay had been cleared and the floor swept and strew with candle chips. Some of the most important men in the county were there, and as darkness came rushing out of the hills, lanterns were lit in the barn and guitar, accordion, fiddle, and piano took over. Women came out of the main house, refreshed, and eager to be swung in powerful arms.

To Ted Brandon, Hedda was always something unbelievable, a miracle which had happened to him, a miracle of flesh and blood which raced his pulse as he put his hand about her waist and swung her in the first waltz. She tossed her reddish chestnut hair back and gave him a challenging, sly glance. "So serious? So grave? A penny for the sheriff's thoughts. . . ."

His thoughts were that he would like to hoist her into his saddle, mount behind, and ride off with her to marry tonight. He said, "I'm thinking of my luck, of the fu-

ture." He was not a glib conversationalist with women. His nature was blunt and to the point.

"The future looks grim then," she twitted him. "And stop calling yourself so lucky. After a while I'll believe you."

"All right," he said smilingly. "I'll admit you're plenty for one man to handle. I'll tame you down, though. I'll quirt you regular every morning once we're married."

She made a face and danced out at arms' length from him. "I'd like to see you do it."

He thought for a moment that perhaps she *would*. There was something wicked and wild in some women when they danced. You never knew what went on behind those half closed lids. They let themselves go a little. This one had a wild streak which came out every once in a while. She had picked him from among a lot of good men because she liked his steadiness, his calm behavior which denoted quiet power; but he wondered now and again if he would always be able to furnish enough music for this one to dance by.

"No, you wouldn't," he said now, suddenly clutching her savagely and looking into her eyes. "I'm a bad man to cross."

She stared back at him and nodded thoughtfully, and there was this spirited challenge as always between them, pulsing his blood and showing him the promise of wonders to come. She was a heady wine. "I believe you are. . . ." Then she suddenly tucked her head under his chin and was lost in the dance. My red-haired wildcat, he thought.

There was sudden clapping and chuckles. They stopped dancing and discovered that the music was taking a rest. They went laughingly to the punch bowl and stood in the midst of a good-natured crowd of kidding friends and drank. Someone said, "Who's gonna cut in on the sheriff?"

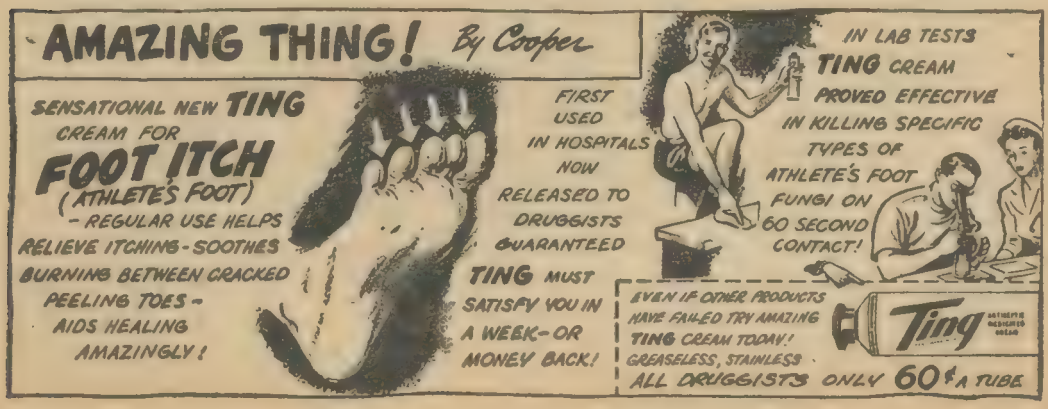
"Don't try it, man. He ain't got his gun, but he'll kill you with a look." Here and there was a dark envious look from some man whom Brandon had replaced in Hedda's affections, but altogether the two of them stood, and danced, in a sea of happy moments.

On the end of a dance Brandon felt a light tap on his shoulder and turned to see Lou. Lou was dressed fit to kill, looked gaily serious. "The next dance will be mine then, ma'am."

Brandon kept his composure covering sudden anger. This was his and Hedda's party. Lou had come unbidden. Here was again the shadow against the sun. Hedda Thorberg was looking Lou over with thinly disguised interest. Lou was intriguing to women and knew it and acted casual. He said admonishingly, "Ain't you gonna introduce me to the lady, Ted?"

"My new deputy," said Brandon. "Louis Dexter."

In very short time Lou was engaged in conversation with Hedda, who pretended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to be condescendingly amused. The orchestra struck up *The Lost Kentucky Waltz,* Ted and Hedda's favorite. Lou nodded to Ted, "Wouldn't hold it against a man, would you, trading on his right to cut in?"

Brandon made a smile at Hedda, "Don't know if I can trust you with this dangerous ladies' man. . . ."

"Never trust a woman," Lou laughed and danced her away.

Brandon walked to the barn portal and stared out into the hot night, feeling all eyes upon him. The strains of *The Lost Kentucky Waltz,* an old pioneer tune, tore at his insides with its wildly nostalgic notes, giving him a sense of foreboding.

After the second cut-in, the second glass of punch and gay exchange of banter, it seemed that Lou and Hedda were sharing something that to a subtle degree made outsiders out of everyone else. People were beginning to notice. There were murmurs and hidden looks from the women, glances from the men. Brandon eventually took Hedda home in a silence they both felt pressing. He corralled the span from the buckboard and joined her on the moonlit frontsteps.

Her face was in deep shadow and when he took her by the elbows he felt at once a stiffness, a lack of yielding. "Your kiss is cold," he told her.

"Yours is."

He was against speaking about it, but a force made him say, with great casualness, "I don't mind being made a fool of once, but I'd not appreciate seeing you gallivanting around before everybody with Lou Dexter again. I kind of mean that, Hedda."

Some devil in her made her say, "Worried he might take me from you?"

"No, I'm not," he said flatly. He then grasped her assertively and kissed her with violence till she went slack in his arms and he had to let her go.

She stood staring up at him, breathing hard. He could not see her eyes. "Good night, Ted," she said, smiling quietly.

He wanted to kiss her again, but a pride held him back. He hesitated a moment and then turned his back on her, walking down the steps. "Good night, Hedda." He went to the corral, got his horse, and mounted. He rode out of the yard without looking back, feeling somewhat a fool, feeling he had handled this thing badly, uncertain of whether she still stood at the front door looking after him as she used to.

HIS anger carried him to town where he walked up and down the street, in vain trying to cool off. In the Silver Buffalo he saw Lou Dexter sitting at a corner table having an idle game of cards with some men. Sarah Elston, star dancing and singing entertainer there, rode a chair near Dexter, studying him unabashedly while he sat casually aware of this, and now and again flipped a remark at her. Someone laughed; the girl came closer and whispered in Lou's ear. He chucked her under the chin and then familiarly pushed her in the face, laughing the while. She waved aside the thick clouds of tobacco smoke, poured herself a drink, and, after tossing it off, resumed teasing Lou.

In his element, Ted thought. He turned shrugging from the window and saw three dark figures, mounted against the moonlight beyond the hitch rail. There was something familiar about them and, as one of them lifted his voice and dismounted, Brandon, in a flash of memory recognized Clarence, Bud, and Ike Wickham, three wandering brothers, never up to any good, each with records as long as their right arms. Once in the past, his own path and theirs had briefly crossed.

He stepped forward under the awning as tall, rangy Clarence was ready to duck under the rail. "Gentlemen," he said softly. "Just stay in those saddles and keep right on riding."

"Huh?" Clarence drew back between the horses. "Who says so?"

"The sheriff."

There was a short silence, then Ike said from the saddle, "What's the man talkin'? I'm damn thirsty."

Bud, heavy-set and adenoidal, leaned forward, peering at the sheriff on the boardwalk, "What you say, Clare . . . he makes a nice target . . . take a shot at him?"

"There's nothing for you here. Just keep riding, gents." His inner annoyance made Brandon incautious. Ike Wickam said, "Damn unfriendly town. . . ."

Bud repeated, sullen, brooding anger in his voice, "Nothing for you here? I say there's a man making a damn nice target! Mister, you know who you're talkin' to? I'd as lief plug a sheriff as anybody!"

But Clarence Wickham's long leg had already swung back across the saddle; he was reining his horse away from the rail. "Shut up," he admonished his brother. "Come on, let's ride."

As the three men hit the center of the street and rode on out of town, the swing door behind Brandon creaked and Lou's voice said a little thickly, "Who was that you just chased out of our fair town?"

Brandon considered that this had been a little too easy; usually the Wickham didn't push so readily. He said thoughtfully, "The Wickham boys; remember them?"

In a moment Lou said, "Seems I do. Faintly. What did they want?"

A mood flipped the words off Brandon's tongue, "Maybe they were looking for you."

"Huh?" Then Lou Dexter's mouth opened with a roar. He let out a rattly laugh. "Wouldn't that be something! It sure would!" He wore the laugh down to a thin string of chuckles, and a moment later he had gone back inside, the door flaps swinging emptily after him.

The next morning Brandon, oiling his guns in his office, looked out the window and saw Dexter, hat in hand, in deep conversation with Hedda on Coltrane's Bakery porch. The whole town was on the street about its business, and the two people made a bright and handsome picture there in the early forenoon sun. When the new deputy entered the sheriff's office a few minutes later, his face carried a grave pensiveness behind its usually cynical look, which seemed new to Brandon.

They checked silently on the day's business for a few minutes, then Brandon said, looking at the wall, "I told the Wickhams to keep out of my territory last night. . . ." He broke a sixgun open and closed it with a hard snap of his hand. "Suppose I tell you the same thing."

"Meaning what?"

Brandon broke and snapped the gun once more. "I think you know."

Dexter was leaning on the desk, looking out the window at something far up the street. He looked briefly at the sheriff and out again, "You telling me not to fall in love with her?"

Brandon thought of all the cheap women Lou had had. "Don't mention that word," he said.

The two men suddenly looked at each other. It was as if Ted Brandon had never really known Lou Dexter before. Dexter's arrogance seemed to have left momentarily, "You're riding mighty high, Ted. For a man who's got a nice a set-up as you with a sheriff's job, a ranch, and the best-looking and wealthiest girl around these parts, you don't seem too sure of yourself."

Brandon, paper-white, measured the other. "Cross my path," he said between his teeth, "and I'll kill you."

The laughter had completely gone out of Dexter; the gold tooth was hidden behind a taut set of lips, his eyes burned, "I didn't stay alive this long, Ted, by being slow with a gun." It was a challenge which hung solidly in the air between them.

But Brandon felt a returning calmness. "You rode in here uninvited and traded on old acquaintance to get a deputy's job you don't rate. I'm telling you: 'Don't cross my path, an' that's whatever.' "

Eventually Dexter's smile returned. He chuckled, shrugged and made a careless gesture with both hands. "All right, Ted, we'll play it your way."

ALONE Brandon pondered bitterly on what business fate had sending this man into his life. Whatever foolishness his youth had contained he felt he had long since made up for it. Lou Dexter did his job as a deputy well enough; sometimes, on his off-duty time he disappeared completely from town for many hours at a stretch and Brandon found himself in the ignominious position of watching him closely. One day, on riding for a visit to the Thorberg ranch, he found Dexter in the horsebarn putting his saddle on one of Hedda's horses. Hedda stood by, leaning against a box stall, regarding Dexter as Ted rode up.

Brandon said curtly, "What are you doing here?"

Dexter glanced at Hedda, said leisurely as he finished tightening the latigo strap, "Borrowed a horse. I lamed my own, riding out of the mountains."

Brandon glanced into the box where Dexter's own horse just then took a limping step. Hedda flashed angry eyes at him, "Yes, it limps." Brandon spoke again to Lou, "What were you doing in the mountains?"

"On my day off, that's my business." Dexter mounted and lifted his hat to the girl, "Thanks for the horse, Miss Hedda. I'll pick up my own tomorrow." He rode out of the barn portal without a look at Brandon. With Dexter a dust cloud in the distance, Brandon turned to Hedda and took her into his arms. She did not respond to his kisses, though she did not actively resist. "Your manners are not improving," she said, getting her breath.

"A man in love is sometimes pretty scant on manners," he said easily, covering his tension. "Hedda, when do we marry?"

She looked long into the distance. "I don't know."

He followed her glance and said between his teeth, "I told that saddle tramp to stay away from you. Is it that you need warning, too?"

"That's getting pretty high-handed, Ted."

"Is it? A scurvy, drifting no-good rides into my life, and right off you start taking up for him. Lou is no damned good, never was, or I wouldn't say so."

"Let others make their own judgment of what he is. I'm not a child!"

"I wonder! I'm a lot older than you. I've been around. Maybe my judgment is a little better." The violence in him carried him away. "You better stay clear of him. I told him I'd kill him if not."

She buried her face in her hands. "Did you think of that *he* might kill *you?* Oh, Lord, I wouldn't want that to happen to either of you. This is awful."

Shocked and taken aback he said, "So it's come to this? A woman sure has no sense." And then, "Maybe you'll have to take your choice." He ground harshly, angrily at her, "What's the matter, have you fallen for that fiddle-footed maverick?"

"I don't know; I don't know. But everything seems to have changed between us. I don't know, Ted."

"Everything seems to have gone to hell," he said slowly.

When he was in the saddle and had ridden across the yard, he turned and looked back at her. She stood in the barn portal, for once looking small and bewildered instead of haughty and proud and self-sure. Her face was an enigma. It was in him to ride back and take her in his arms and smother her with passionate kisses, but he conquered that.

He waved cursorily and rode on, swearing under his breath, remembering the many girls in the past that smooth fascinating Lou Dexter had left upset and bewildered. Damn women, he thought, were they all sisters under the skin, the good ones with the bad? He had the cursed feeling

that the two had been kissing when he rode into the yard and that the air of the barn was full of it.

THE air of the town was permeated with news when he got back to town. The Overland Pacific Railroad had been stopped at Eagle Pass in the Hussars and a shipment of gold from the mines at Apache City had been lifted very neatly and professionally by men who had uncoupled the baggage car and locomotive while riding as passengers. The remaining cars had rolled back down the grade ten miles to Tellersville and almost derailed before they could be stopped.

This had happened two days before, but the news hadn't got through because the single telegraph line running north from Sunrock had been cut, likely by accomplices of the on-the-train-robbers who were waiting in the pass with horses.

Now the excited surmise of the people in Sunrock was that the robbers had cut the telegraph because they intended to head in that direction and talk ran swiftly about getting up parties and posses to go looking for the men who carried eighty thousand dollars worth of strip bullion. The possible reward would be nothing to sneeze at.

Dan Larson, Ted's second deputy, and the town marshal, were in the sheriff's office looking over wanted circulars when Brandon entered. His rage was still great in him, obscuring everything else in his mind, but he was able to tell them: "Find whatever you can on the Wickham gang, headed by Clarence, Bud, and Ike, and I think you'll have something. They passed through here two weeks ago. I chased them out of town, and they chased too easy."

Larson dug into a pile and came out with three pictured circulars. "That's a good lead . . . never thought of them."

Brandon said, "Where's Lou Dexter?"

"In the Buffalo . . . flirting with Sarah."

"Some deputy. . . ." Brandon went out, closing the door behind him sharply. In the Silver Buffalo, Sarah Elston sat on Lou Dexter's lap. Lou was slightly drunk, his eyes shiny. When he saw Ted enter, he pushed the girl off and onto another chair and focused all his attention on the sheriff. There was a sullen, smouldering anger in him and his hands tensed, his fingers playing nervously with bottle and glass before him. He eased his gun-leg off the side of the chair, bending his knee toward the floor.

Brandon went to the corner where they sat by themselves and said to the girl, "Leave us alone, Sarah, I want to talk to Lou."

She gave him a glance, then bent over Lou Dexter, and began smothering him with a passionate kiss which lasted almost a minute. When she straightened up, she looked resentfully at Brandon and spoke with the instinct for trouble of a woman in love, "You treat my Lou right, Sheriff, or I'll put poison in your whisky."

Brandon grunted. Sarah was hard as nails, but he had seen the signs before. Lou could make them fall; when he was through, he'd drop them and look for better game. He said, "Better see that *he* treats *you* right. Leave us, will you."

She went into the back part of the establishment and Lou said testily, "What's on your mind, Sheriff? I'm a busy man."

"So I notice," said Brandon, not having Sarah in mind. He pulled a chair up with his toe and settled carefully on it without relaxing. "Lou," he said then, "I warned you once. . . ."

A bitter resentful hatred shone out of his former partner's eyes. "What're you worried about? I'm well occupied." He indicated with his head the direction Sarah had gone.

A rank distaste filled Brandon. For a second he was at a loss at what to say. At last he spoke. "I'm not fooled."

Dexter snorted, "That would make fine news, wouldn't it? Can you see it on the front page of the *Courier:* 'Sheriff and

deputy shoot each other in saloon over wealthy girl?' "

Brandon spoke between wooden lips, "Get out, Lou. You're fired. I don't want to see you in Sunrock Valley again. Get moving."

Lou's voice was like a sighing breath of wind. He shook his head a little, "That easy, Ted? That easy? Just tell a man to get out? Don't we all wish we could settle everything that way."

Desperate thoughts raced through Brandon's brain in the silence. If he killed Lou here and now, how easily would he be able to explain that away? His whole future was in the balance.

As if he was reading his mind Lou Dexter said, "Life just ain't that simple, is it, Ted. Well, let me tell you something: While all the half-wit would-be heroes in this town are running around making up posses and parties to recover eighty thousand gold dollars, I happen to be the only one who knows where they are and who took 'em."

"The Wickhams?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. Who's saying?"

"You one of them?"

A devilish expression came over Lou's face. "You're so sure I'm no good. You're so sure of everything. You can tell a man what kind of feelings to have or not to have. You can tell a man to get the hell out of somebody else's life . . . All right, have you got the guts to go out with me, alone, and find out for yourself? I can show you where that eighty thousand in gold is. I happen to have made it my business to know." He hesitated, "And maybe we can find out something else too, Mr. Sure-of-yourself."

Brandon stared into those burning eyes. Lou was a gambler, would stake all he had on even this slimmest chance of winning the moon. But there was something here beyond finding out where the Wickhams had taken the gold. He could not live in this town with this man; he could not kill him merely for falling in love with Hedda. Maybe here was a way out for both of them. It was a mad moment. He said curtly, "All right, Lou. I'll get you. Let's ride."

AS THEY walked out of the saloon side by side, Sarah came hurrying from the back room. "Where are you going, Lou?"

"Out to make my fortune. I'll be back."

She got another kiss from him, but then he threw her roughly aside, "That's enough," and went outside and spat demonstratively in the dust under the rail before he mounted. Brandon did not miss this gesture.

The girl stood looking after them as they rode west out of town, stirrup to stirrup, before they headed north and west. They traveled for three hours, constantly climbing along little used foothill trails. Neither of them spoke, but kept an alert watch of each other. They had crossed the main range of the Hussars and were above a small intermediate mountain valley when Lou led the way onto a rough, stony escarpment overlooking a tiny trail below, which led southwestward toward desert country. It was now four o'clock in the afternoon, and the shadows were getting long and beginning to move faster. "We wait here," Lou said and slid from the saddle, hoisting his rifle from the scabbard.

Brandon regarded him pensively and thought of the trap he had ridden into. With darkness coming Lou might slip away and potshoot him. He did not relish the prospect of a duel in the dark and cursed himself for a fool, coming on this wild-goose errand.

Lou looked at him as if reading his mind, and a small smile creased his long, handsome face. The dying sun somehow gave him a devilish look. Brandon kept his hand near his pistol butt.

Lou walked cautiously away, carrying the rifle, and Brandon said, "Stay here in pistol range, Lou," stopping the other. "I've seen that trick used before."

A vast grin opened Dexter's face. "Always an old fox, weren't you. You came out here for the same purpose I did."

Brandon made a poker face, but the contest and challenge which was between them was evident in both men's eyes. They could not deny it. "What about the Wickhams?" Brandon said then. "I guess I know. There aren't any Wickhams. You never knew anything. You merely tricked me to get me out here. Still think you're fast enough with a gun?"

"You got me wrong." Lou pointed to northeast along the sinewy trail below them. "Look."

Brandon did not look, and Dexter then lay down behind a boulder and sighted his rifle. Walking up behind him Brandon saw in the distance a party of three prospectors, riding three mules and leading three pack animals approaching with all the leisure of men who have all the time in the world on their hands. "The Wickhams," Lou said, "on their way to California, by slow mule train and in perfect disguise."

He laid the first man in his sights. "Well," he said, "shall I start picking them off? With luck I should have them all three before they hear the sound of the rifle and know what hit them."

A shudder ran through Brandon. "Without giving a man a chance? You're a cold-blooded article, Lou."

Lou grunted, "You ever gun-fight the Wickhams? They're a tough lot. You take that kind of game any way you can."

Brandon said, "Nevertheless that's not my way . . . and I'd never know whether you were one of them, would I? No, we'll do it this way: You go down the slope and disarm them on the path while I cover you from here with my rifle. We'll both bring them in together."

Dexter turned and studied Brandon's eyes, and the sheriff made an unreadable look in a stiff poker face. The game was getting high and the odds tricky; their tenseness increased. Lou considered heavily; at last said, "And what's to stop you from shooting me in the back?"

"I could have done so long ago."

"That's a lie."

"I never shot a man in the back."

"Got to be a first time for everything."

"I never shot a man in the back."

Dexter sucked on his teeth. At last he got to his feet. "All right," he said. "Cover me if that's the way you want to do this."

They waited till the six mules and the three prospector-disguised Wickham brothers were an eighth of a mile away; then Dexter worked his way down the slope and walked out into the path, his rifle under his arm. Calling to the bandits and pointing half way up the slope where Brandon stood, his rifle at ready, he ordered them to throw their weapons to the side of the road.

FOR ten seconds the little caravan stood frozen to their spots in the path, then Clarence Wickham called out some challenge to Dexter, which Brandon could not hear. Dexter turned halfway around, almost facing Brandon. "They want to talk this over. Say they got an offer to make."

The sheriff, who could have shielded himself behind an outcropping stone, stood out in full sight for Dexter to see. This was the way he wanted it. "There's nothing to talk over. Tell them to drop their guns."

Another few seconds; then Lou Dexter swung his rifle back toward the Wickhams; in doing so he stumbled or pretended to stumble. He stepped backward a few steps, went to his knees, and swung the rifle sight with lightning speed uphill to take a snap-shot at Brandon. At the same time the bandits went for their guns.

Lou's first shot took the sheriff in the thigh, knocking him to the ground, but Ted Brandon fired as he went, smashing Lou Dexter's left shoulder with a first bullet, knocking Clarence Wickham out of the mule saddle with the next. Dexter was firing with his pistol then, spraying the hillside with lead, Bud was behind his mount,

rifle shooting at the now prone Brandon. Coolly Brandon shot the mule from in front of him and killed Bud with the next shot. Ike coming last, took a quick survey of the situation, turned tail to fight another day as the rest of the mules, packs and saddle, panicked past the place where Clarence and Bud lay.

Lou had lost his rifle; Brandon's rifle was empty. He limped wearily down the slope, his pistol poised. "You give up, Lou?"

"Hell no, I got two shots left in this hog-leg."

With increasing difficulty Brandon approached. Lou was sitting against a small boulder, holding his gun trained on Brandon. It wavered, a mass of frothy crimson appeared on his chin and he coughed twice. "Shoot," said Brandon.

The gun sank down slowly. "Can't. I'm sick." It hit the ground with a clatter, and Brandon walked over and kicked it away.

There was a greenish pallor behind Dexter's tan as he looked up at the sheriff and tried to grin. " 'S'a funny life . . . never wanted anything so bad as Hedda . . . never . . ." A distant veiled look came to his eyes. "Eighty thousand dollars . . ." He snapped the fingers of his right hand weakly and let the hand drop. He said again, " 'S'a funny life, Ted. You gotta drink? All I wanted in Sunrock that day was a drink . . . an' I seen your goddamn . . . saddle . . ." He blinked his eyes slowly and shook his head "Give my regards . . . tell her . . . tell her she was worth the gamble . . ." He collapsed sideways and lay dead.

It was more than a week before Ted Brandon rode over to the Thorberg ranch. He had not seen Hedda since he had come back to town, letting the people believe that Lou had died doing his duty as deputy sheriff. He found her in the horse barn, giving a newborn colt a bottle. She looked up at him with a dark, searching look in her eyes. There was a distance between them now, which, he feared, would always be there. He made no attempt to kiss her; that, it seemed, was completely gone.

He had fought with himself, trying to decide whether he should let her go on believing Lou died a hero, or tell her the truth. Which would be kindest? Now, seeing her look upon him, he thought there would always be a tiny, worrying doubt in her mind as to who actually killed Lou, as to how he actually died.

He made the plunge. "The Wickhams didn't kill Lou," he said and saw her eyes go completely black, "I did."

She fought for her breath and a small tear came from each eye; he thought surely he had lost her for good and ever. "*You* did?" He nodded and told her the story, finishing with, "He told me to tell you you were worth the gamble he took . . ."

She said after a while, "And why did you tell me? Do you expect me to believe you. . . ."

"Would you prefer to go on thinking him a hero, like the others do? Think of this: I did not have to tell you. If you had fallen for him my chances with you would be better if I let you go on thinking of him as you wished." He shrugged heavily and made ready to go. "Like Lou I rode the wrong trails once, but I mended my ways. I've never accepted half-measures from myself since then. I've never given half measures either. That's the way I am. I'm sorry if this hurt you. . . ." He pulled on his gloves slowly and went out to his horse and mounted. "Telling you this was *my* gamble. Good-bye Hedda."

Now it was done; now they were finished forever. He rode at a walk, head bowed, cursing the saddle that Lou had spotted that day; wondering over the fickleness and unscrutability of women's emotions.

He was almost out of the large yard and turning through the gate, when, through the tail of his eye he saw a bright figure waving at him from the horse barn. Unbelievably he heard the words: "Ted, wait. Wait!" ★ ★ ★

STAR'S PIN-UP GIRL-OF-THE-MONTH

If she wanted him, no man could resist Angeleta. Her love was as dark and dangerous as the night, blazing with the deadly fire of her kisses. And when she loved a man, he thought the world well lost to give his life for her.

For more about her, turn to page 92.

OWLHOOT GAL

by Frank P. Castle

Chase Illing had three shots to make Neil Dawson dance to his tune—a brother's reputation, a hang-noose charge, and a jet-haired temptress from owlhoot!

NEIL DAWSON sat his big roan gelding and studied the spatter of lights across the river. It ran wide here, a half mile of shallow, turgidly flowing water, with steep eroded banks on both sides.

If he stayed here, in outlaw territory where only a couple of harassed U. S. marshals represented the law's feeble grip, he was reasonably safe, but

"Get down," he told her. "He's got to see you."

if he hit the river, crossed into Texas, things could be vastly different. He was wanted in Texas—a hang-noose charge. And even in this unsettled year of 1870, this thieves' trading town of Griddville, yonder, was dangerous, for Rangers were known to pay it unexpected visits.

Dawson gigged the roan down the bank, splashed across the old trail ford, and headed up the other side. At an abandoned hide warehouse, he dismounted, tied his horse in deep shadow, took a couple of precautionary pulls at his guns, and started walking.

It wasn't far—a saloon, at the head of Griddville's one short street. The town as usual was very quiet; its business came mostly from horsemen from across the river in

a hurry to get back into the territory. Neil Dawson moved up to the saloon's batwings, stopped just short of them, and gave the street sharp scrutiny.

There was nobody in sight, no sound of movement. A lone horse was tied to a hitchrail before the saloon. He glanced over the swinging doors, grunted at what he saw, and stepped on inside.

The place was empty, save for Chase Illing standing behind the bar. Illing was a bluffly handsome, fleshy man who wore a frock coat and flowered vest with a big diamond in his stickpin. A lamp flickered on the backbar, but there was no other illumination.

"Come ahead, Neil," Chase Illing said. "Only the two of us, like my message promised. Have a drink."

"I didn't ride from the Canadian just for a drink," Dawson said. "What do you want, Chase?"

"Why, a favor," Illing said. "I've got a little job I want you to handle for me."

Dawson stopped at the bar, wondering that he had once been this man's friend.

"Spare me your smooth talk, Chase. You know I'd see you scorch in hell before I'd do you a favor. When you want something, you crowd a man in a corner and squeeze him. Well, this is the corner, and that hint about my brother Hardy in the message you sent is the squeeze. So—what have you got planned for him to make me dance your tune?"

Illing put two glasses on the bar and poured. He pushed one glass toward Dawson. "Drink, boy, you need it . . . Your kid brother is doing pretty well, ranching the Brazos bottoms. His place is down close to Tornudas, isn't it? Kind of strange, that . . . But never mind. He's your only kin. Be a pity if he ran into any trouble. Not much danger he will, of course—providing you do me the favor."

Illing downed his drink and patted with blunt finger-tips at his close-cropped mustache. His eyes were wicked, taunting.

Dawson exhaled wearily and reached for the glass. Hardy had to be protected, of course, at about any cost. He was a good boy, struggling to get ahead and to live down his brother's infamy—and Illing had risen fast to power in the state's corrupt reconstruction government at Austin. At a word from him, Hardy would be ruined.

"All right, Chase," he growled, swallowing the whisky. "You're to leave Hardy alone. What do you want from me in return?"

"Not much." Illing's jaw suddenly tightened. "You know that outlaw country, know where a man on the dodge would go. A man like Dan Kyber. . . ."

Dawson grunted in surprise. "Kyber? He's over in the Fort Smith jail, waiting for a Federal noose."

"Was," Illing said. "He got loose. With —ah—a little help. He's in the territory. And I checked up—you knew him once."

"Correction!" Dawson said sharply. "We've just crossed trails a couple of times."

Know Dan Kyber? Nobody could answer yes to that. He was even more of a loner than Neil Dawson himself, had specialized in daring one-man raids on stagecoach treasure boxes and rail express cars, from Missouri to Arizona.

"You can recognize him," Illing said. "Go find Kyber. Bring him to me. That's your chore, Neil."

Dawson stared in disbelief. "Chase, you're crazy!"

"Crazy or not, you're going to put him in my hands. I should have gone to Arkansas myself, but I thought those I hired could handle him—" Illing caught himself. "I'm giving you some bait he's sure to snap at." He turned his head, called out, "Come in here, Miss Malotte."

A slow sound of footsteps began. A door opened at the far end of the barroom, and a woman appeared.

She was rather tall when measured against Neil Dawson, and he was a big

man. Full-bodied, he thought, though it was hard to tell—startlingly, she wore masculine gear—gray trousers stuffed into Star boots and an old coat and carried a hat in her hands. Her jet-black hair was tightly clubbed at the nape of her neck. She was quite pretty, though her features were set in harsh, bitter lines.

"Cherry Malotte, Kyber's woman," Illing said to Dawson. "Just trail her through that country; she'll bring him into the open. The rest is up to you."

THE woman stopped a couple of feet from Dawson, her eyes flickering briefly at him; now she looked down at the floor, her deep bosom stirring a rough blue shirt with her rapid, shallow breathing.

"Chase, a woman can't go into that country!" Dawson protested.

"This one is going. She'll ride the horse that's waiting out front. The two of you had better hit the river, right now. You haven't got until Christmas to find me Kyber; a bunch of Federal marshals from Fort Smith are hunting him hard. I'm giving you a week."

"Damnation, man, it may take a week just to find out the places he's been—and another to check the rest!"

"A week," Illing repeated implacably. He added, with lip-curled coarseness, "Flaunt the woman. Use her any way that's necessary—and find Kyber!"

The woman's hands were soft and white; her complexion was pale. Even a day of sun in that outlaw brush would be cruel mistreatment.

"You understand what you're letting yourself in for?" Dawson asked her. "It's tough, mean country; it kills a lot of men."

"Of course I understand." Her voice was low, gritty. "And I'm ready for it. Why else would I be here, dressed like this?"

So be it. "Let's get started, then," Dawson said.

"Grab him," Illing said, pouring himself another drink. "Or else—"

Yes. Ruin for Hardy Dawson, a good, hard-working boy whose only fault was his kinship to a man Texas wanted to hang.

The woman went first, directly to that horse at the hitchrail. Dawson held out a hand to assist her, but she ignored this gesture, swinging lightly into saddle.

"Ride to the river," he told her. "I'll pick up my horse and join you there."

But he paused a moment, studying her still, cold face. Kyber's woman, set to betray him—for cash, he supposed. And equally ready to betray Neil Dawson, who felt certain he knew Illing's real plan to grab Dan Kyber. A dirty business, from any angle . . . and, for himself, no way out—yet.

A sudden ring of bootheels sounded, from behind him. There was a startled exclamation: "Neil!"

Dawson wheeled around. Enough light from that lamp in the saloon came over the batwings for him to see with fair clarity the man who had come along. He was lean and quiet in manner, looked like a schoolteacher—and in fact had been, at Lampasas, with Neil Dawson one of his pupils. But the turning years had changed him into something else . . . one of the small band of men struggling to maintain some semblance of decency in a corruption-ridden land—a Texas Ranger.

"Boy," Lew Clark said, gun flashing into his hand, "I never thought you'd be fool enough to come back—and hoped if you did, we wouldn't have to meet."

"Lew, I hoped that, too." There was a feeling of bitter hopelessness in him—then flaring hate for Chase Illing. If all that talk about Dan Kyber had been only part of an elaborate trap to snare him. . . .

His hand must have twitched. Clark said, stepping into the street, "Stand still, Neil! I've got to take you. Don't make it hard—"

Cherry Malotte cried, "Dawson, run!"

She was whirling her horse, slamming it between Dawson and Lew Clark, driving it straight at the Ranger. Clark pulled trig-

ger, a shot going high, in an attempt to make the animal shy. Then he was spun aside, into the dust, and the woman wheeled her mount hard toward the river.

Dawson had backed hurriedly across the street, a gun out, watching Clark. The Ranger pushed himself up, balanced on one knee as he swung his own weapon to bear on the woman. Then he let her go and searched the shadows for Dawson.

"Stand still, Neil!" Clark yelled, and fired, a low bullet, humming close as it groped for Dawson in the darkness. Dawson shook his head; even though he knew the Ranger would likely follow him fast he couldn't return that bullet—not at Lew Clark. Neil Dawson holstered his gun and ran fast for his horse.

CHAPTER TWO

Horse Trader

CHERRY MALOTTE was waiting at the bank. Dawson waved sharply toward the river. "Ahead of me! And keep moving when you hit the other side!"

She obeyed, showering spray high. Dawson followed along, twisted in his saddle, gun ready, tautly watching behind. The town still held its incurious quiet; Griddville was one town where gunshots wouldn't bring the curious from behind locked doors and drawn blinds.

There was no sound of pursuit. But Lew Clark would likely soon be along and Dawson thought, others as well, if he understood Chase Illing aright.

The far bank of the river was steep, crowned by thick brush. The woman, driving her mount up the narrow track from the river, tilted back so suddenly just before she went up and over that Dawson thought the animal had lost its balance. But she displayed superb skill, shifting weight and making it.

They crashed into stunted timber, and Dawson forged ahead, setting a fast pace. over a faint trail that ran into low sandhills. The trail forked, presently, and they veered off to the east, splashing across a creek and into thickets where thorns raked them. The woman, though she stayed close to him, said nothing until more than an hour had passed. Then she spoke quietly, "This horse isn't equal to such hard going, Dawson."

He reined down and went to inspect the animal, running his hand over the quivering muscles. The horse snorted and shied from his touch. "Might have guessed he'd hand you such a nag," Dawson said. "Chase doesn't miss a trick."

"We're being followed?" she said.

Dawson tilted his head, listening to a distant whisper of hoofbeats. "They're three or four miles back of us. You didn't know he planned on it?"

Her response to the skeptical note in his voice was cold. "He told me to go with you and find Dan Kyber—nothing more. I haven't the slightest idea why he wants Dan, if you're wondering about that too . . . And, even though this horse is liable to quit any minute, we're going on!"

"Get down. We'll walk a bit," Dawson said. "Unless those are old territory hands after us, I should be able to lose them for a while."

"That man who tried to stop you—who was he?"

"Ranger. It'll be no easy chore to lose him. Let's go."

They fought the thickets on foot, leading their mounts. Dawson had the lead. The same branches slashing him were also slapping her, but she didn't complain. A few hours after midnight, he stopped again, in a narrow cleared space. "We'll stay here until day."

"Dawson, where do you figure Dan may be?"

"I'm not figuring." He unstrapped his blanket-roll, spread it for her. "This is a big country; he might be anywhere. Tomorrow, we'll start angling for him."

"Using me as bait. . . ." Cherry Malotte's voice was bleak.

"Yes. Get some sleep."

He sat with legs crossed, gun out and resting against his thigh, listening to her steady, deep breathing as she presently slumbered. Dawson did not think it was part of Illing's plan to bother them—at least, not until Kyber showed up. Lew Clark was something else again. He meditated somberly on the strange fate that had set Lew and himself against each other.

Toward dawn, Dawson dozed briefly. He came awake with the first rays of the sun in his eyes. Cherry Malotte had shaken down her dark hair and was braiding it into a tight coronet. His gun was beside her.

"I felt you needed some rest, so I've watched a while," she said. "There has been no sight or sound of anybody."

By daylight, she presented a different aspect. There was delicacy in the curve of her chin, gentleness in the set of her mouth. She was about the last woman he would ever have picked to be mixed up with a man like Kyber. Wondering how it had happened, automatically testing every sound that came to him, he answered her, his voice low and almost inaudible.

"You're wrong. We're being watched. Can you use a gun?"

"Yes." It was a steady answer, though she caught her breath at his words.

"Well, don't use that one unless I tell you to, or unless it's absolutely necessary."

He rose then, stretching, lifted his left-side weapon, and whipped toward the south. The eared-back hammer of his gun eased down as he saw who skulked there, and he said, half-angrily, "Stop spying, John, and come on in!"

There was a wheezy chuckling and the crackle of brush as a fat man appeared, waddling toward them, slanting a long, sly look at the woman.

"Couldn't quite make up my mind it was you, boy, after all the years you've been traveling by yourself. You understand."

The man wore moccasins, butternut pants, an ancient, grease-stiffened buckskin shirt, and a steepled black hat. His hair was long and braided. He looked like an Indian, but he wasn't.

"John Bockman," Dawson told Cherry Malotte. "His wife is a Kiowa woman; he's a horse trader." This was approximately true, though Bockman usually traded without the knowledge or consent of those he was dealing with. Dawson did not introduce Cherry to him. "John, what are you doing in these parts?"

"A hunting trip," Bockman said vaguely. "What about you, Dawson? I thought you never came south of the Canadian."

"Well—" Dawson coughed slightly. "I had some business in Texas. Think now I'll take a look over east."

"Yeah?" Bockman thumbed his pudgy chin, greedily eyeing Cherry. "Sure ought to be an interesting trip!"

Color flared in the woman's cheeks. Dawson spoke abruptly to her: "Let's go, Cherry."

"Hey!" Bockman said. "I'm bound east. Why don't we ride together?"

"We're in a hurry," Dawson said.

THE squaw-man hung around, watching them. They headed off through the thickets, presently breaking into open country. Rest had benefited Cherry's horse, but the animal obviously wasn't going to do for the hard traveling ahead.

After a bit Cherry studied the sun, frowning. "We're going north, not east."

"Yes. Bockman's the biggest gossip in the territory. I'm hoping he'll spread word fast that I'm traveling with a woman—whose name I gave him—that I don't want company, and that I'm moving north when I said I'd go east. Heading for Kansas, he should add."

"Why?"

"Well, keeping a white woman in this country would be too risky; there are men

who'd chance anything to get their hands on you. Bockman knows I'm wanted in Texas, so Kansas is the obvious place to take you."

Cherry nibbled at her lip, obviously sobered by his blunt words. "Will Kyber hear that?"

"If he's in the territory, yes. He ought to recognize you, too—Bockman won't miss a thing in the description he'll send out."

She showed bright color in her cheeks again. "And that talk about heading for Kansas should bring Dan hunting us. But—it might be days before the news reaches him."

"Yes. So we'll have to start other tongues wagging—and also do some hunting ourselves. There are several places an outlaw can buy himself grub and fresh horses, hide out and rest, if he's being chased hard. Sofer's Post, on Lost Pony creek, is the closest. We're heading there, now."

They rode through the bright, hot morning. This was gently rolling country, lifting toward the north into rugged hills about fifty miles away. Sofer's place was a bit off toward the west.

Dawson kept a constant watch on their back trail, but saw no sign of life anywhere in the wild, empty land. Illing's men must be there, though.

This was a strange case, played undoubtedly for high stakes—Illing never played for anything else. And Neil Dawson was a white chip, his role only to get the woman to Kyber, when Illing's men would close in fast to grab the outlaw. After that . . . a bullet for himself, probably, Dawson thought. And the woman? Her intended fate he couldn't guess. Maybe she represented an added inducement to those Illing had hired to follow along.

There was only one slim chance he could see to get free and to pin Illing down to some guarantee his brother wouldn't be harmed; he had to grab Kyber himself, dodge Illing's men, and use the outlaw in a trade. It was slim, but it *was* a chance.

This thought made him smile wryly. Dan Kyber, fugitive from a Fort Smith hanging, wasn't going to be easy for anybody to grab. Besides, the woman would be in the way, and Illing wouldn't have overlooked the possibility of his trying just what he had in mind.

Dawson called a halt presently under a steep creek-bank, built a fire, and prepared a meager meal of bacon, hardtack, and coffee. "Sorry I don't pack more grub," he told Cherry.

She studied him over the rim of her tin cup. "Dawson, you surely don't live like this all the time—in the saddle, I mean, on the run?"

"I've got a soddy north of the Canadian where I light every once in a while. Share it with a Tonkawa boy who looks after a horse herd for me; I trade them for what I need."

"It sounds like a hard life."

He shrugged. "The law wants me in Texas—a hanging charge. Guess I do live hard. But I live free."

"How long do you think you can go on?"

"Don't know. Had a couple of cattle herds through here lately, trailing to the rails at Kansas; there'll be more of them. The territory's being opened up. Can't hang around much longer, I suppose."

"What will you do when the law moves in?"

"Wash up and douse the fire, will you?" Dawson said. "I'll take a look around."

He climbed the bank. Her final question had flicked a raw nerve. Opened land meant settled land, and the law always came with settlers. The territory wouldn't be sanctuary for him much longer. He would have to run again. But he was mighty tired of running.

There was no sign of their pursuers. He examined Cherry's horse. The animal wouldn't be good for much more travel. And he had hoped to make it to Sofer's some-

time tonight. But not with that horse.

Cherry appeared. "Get me a squirrel, Dawson, and I'll make a stew tonight. I'm a pretty good cook."

He was somewhat surprised to find himself smiling. He hadn't smiled much in late years. "How are you on steaks? Sofer sometimes has a side of beef hanging—"

Three riders emerged from creek timber, not fifty yards away to the north, and came at them in a fast run.

Dawson had kept this fire small, but there had been some smoke, and they had probably seen it and worked through the cottonwoods until they were sure there were only two people here.

He lifted his left-side gun and passed it to Cherry. "Put this in the pocket of your coat, hammer back."

She nodded tautly. The three riders stopped. The one in the middle, a lanky, scarred-face man said, "Don't often see you down this way, Dawson."

"Heading back north, Creed."

The one on Ib Creed's left, a wolfish-looking kid called Siggs, stared at Cherry and showed an evil grin. "Always wondered why you didn't keep a squaw in your soddy," he said to Dawson. "Man, I'd kick mine out if I had something like her!"

The one on the right, a big fellow with a flat, pock-marked face, began to drift his horse off to the side. "Oden, sit still," Dawson said coldly. "Creed, you and your friends ride on."

Creed leaned forward, crossing his arms, with the forward elbow resting on his saddlehorn. "Why, Oden don't get to see a white gal very often, Dawson. He's just excited, don't mean anything—"

"He means to get behind me," Dawson said. "You going, now, or have I got to prod you?"

Siggs spat at Dawson's boots. "Going, hell! We mean to stay and enjoy the company. But you, jasper, you're leaving us—"

"Yeah!" Ib Creed said, body jerking erect. His right hand, the one that had been hidden, flipped up the gun he had drawn from under his coat. He smashed a shot at Neil Dawson.

CHAPTER THREE

A Fool's Game

IT WAS as close a miss as Dawson had ever known, stirring air against his cheek in snarling passage. His own gun fired the instant it cleared leather. The two shots sounded like one. Hit low in the body, Creed was driven from his saddle. He spilled to the ground with the curious inertness of one instantly dead.

The weapon Dawson had handed Cherry was out of her pocket, leveled at Oden. Siggs, who had drawn with snaky swiftness, looked at the muzzle of Dawson's weapon and uncurled his fingers, letting the iron drop.

"Step down," Dawson told them. The sound of those shots would carry far; he and Cherry had to get out of here.

He collected their guns, patted them hurriedly, shoved them at a couple of trees.

"Nose them hard! Cherry, aim for their backbones if they wiggle."

The horse Creed had been riding was a big bay. Dawson shortened stirrups on it, helped himself to a fistful of shells, some corn meal, a chunk of fresh beef, two cans of tomatoes from their supplies, then emptied all the guns he had lifted, and threw them in the creek. He slapped the horses of Oden and the kid and sent them running.

"His leather," he told Cherry. When she was mounted on the bay, he backed to his own horse, swung into saddle, and heeled the animal hard.

His caution was justified; Siggs had a gun in his boot. He emptied it, but Dawson had put too much distance between them in a hurry.

He did not drop the pace from a hard

run until a couple of miles up the creek; it bent there, and he led Cherry across, then went on, continuing a fast pace, keeping a constant watch to the rear.

It was still the same empty country, void of movement to the far horizon. The long-pacing bay kept easily alongside him. He finally considered Cherry Malotte. There was a pinched expression about her mouth. He said, "Sorry it had to be so violent."

She shook her head. "Don't be. I'm still cold inside at the thought of what would have happened to me if that bullet had hit you."

"Creed showed me a new trick, that business of sneaking a gun from under his coat. If he hadn't been in a hurry, it would have worked. Creed was too anxious to see me dead. The worst hunger in this country is woman-hunger. That's part of what I tried to warn you about, back in Griddville. It was gnawing Creed—and Oden and the kid, too; they'll follow us, fast as they can catch their horses. The farther we go, the more of that kind will be on our trail."

She did not respond, wondering, maybe, whether he had felt such hunger also. Well, he had, of course. He had spent many a sleepless night remembering the girls in their finery at Lampasas dances, stolen kisses, the warmth and softness of them in his embrace. After three years in the territory, seeing never a white woman in that time, Neil Dawson had thought his own desires were dulled. Now he knew better.

He studied Cherry, riding quietly beside him. She was a strange, contradictory person, of obvious good breeding, and she had shown, in that bad moment, a steadiness and courage he greatly admired.

No matter what she was, she could not be exposed any longer to the danger they had narrowly escaped. The trap was baited; he could watch it alone. Dawson swerved his horse at hers, grabbed Cherry's reins, and brought both animals to a halt.

He thought she drew back, thought something flickered like heat lightning in her dark eyes. "What now, Dawson?"

It made him a little angry. Was she thinking Ib Creed's murderous action had put disturbing notions in his head?

"Look, we can circle and head back; I can have you in Texas again tonight—"

Cherry relaxed. "No. If you're thinking that next time you might not be as fast or as lucky and want to be rid of such a dangerous nuisance as myself, leave me. I won't blame you a bit. But with you or without you, I'm going on. And if Dan Kyber can be found, I'm going to find him!"

She drove her horse forward. Dawson followed her. Maybe she wasn't playing Illing's game, after all; she might be in love with Kyber.

He wished wearily there was a woman somewhere who would care this much for him.

THEY pushed on, through the long afternoon and into a black night, the horses beginning to tire and fight their bits, swinging to the west of those looming hills, staying close to Lost Pony creek.

There was some stiffness between them now, very little talk. He made several stops by the creek, handing her one of his guns, taking himself off, always scouting the country behind. He noted her strong effort to stay clean, to keep the dust shaken out of her clothes. Her fair skin was now pink from the sun; she must be growing unutterably weary. But there was no whisper of complaint, until, long past sundown as they were still plodding on, she said, "Dawson, I've never tried sleeping in a saddle. Should I begin learning how it's done?"

"We'll make camp soon," he told her, "after we reach Sofer's."

Three hours past dark, they finally arrived. Sofer's was only a pole corral where half-wild mustangs squealed and fought each other, a couple of brush wickiups—

Sofer's woman was an Osage, and some of her people were always around—and a sandbank soddy.

"Get down," Dawson told Cherry. "He's got to see you."

She stumbled and almost fell, dismounting. Dawson put out a hand, intending to steady her; he discovered it was around the woman, and she was leaning against him, cheek touching his chest.

Only for a moment. But he was shaken by that brief contact—and wondered if she was, also.

Cherry murmured an apology. "My legs feel like two sticks—but I don't like this place. I want to ride on, Dawson."

"We won't hang around long," he promised.

To his relief the soddy was empty, save for Sofer, his Osage woman, and some beady-eyed kids. Sofer, who ran a still somewhere on the creek, set out a jug of white lightning, licking his lips as he stared at Cherry Malotte.

Dawson sipped the vile liquor. "Dan Kyber been here maybe, Mose?" he asked, making his voice taut.

"Lots of people always coming and going, and I got a poor memory for names," the trader said, scratching his big paunch. The Osage woman stood back from the room's one flickering candle, watching Dawson.

He described Kyber. Mose Sofer scratched some more. "Don't remember him. Any message if he shows up?"

"No." Dawson rang a coin on the crude bar. "Let's go, Cherry."

Squirming in her saddle again, she murmured wearily, "All that riding for nothing!"

"He's been here," Dawson said. "May still be around. We've got to find a safe place for the night, quick."

"But how do you know?"

"His woman told me, with her eyes. I've always been friendly with Osages. One of those kids might be hot-footing right now to where Sofer keeps men who want to hole up a while . . . Let's go—to the creek; then we'll double back a bit."

HE RELAXED, watching Cherry as she knelt beside the small fire. The sight of her and the good smell of that outlaw beef frying made him feel oddly content.

Closely spaced cottonwoods and brush left by a winter flood had provided him with as good a spot as he could wish. He had piled the brush up to shield the fire, making a tight enclosure, nearly head high. The horses were picketed on down creek a ways; he would bring them closer just before turning in.

Cherry turned her head suddenly. "This is a strange thing, Dawson—for a couple of minutes I completely forgot where I was, and why!"

"When you're wolf-hungry and there's meat on the fire, it's hard to think about anything else," he agreed. "Grub nearly ready?"

"I suppose. I know this beef is going to be stringy and it's hardly singed, but I can't wait any longer."

They hunkered side by side in the small enclosure, elbows touching, and ate. They were good steaks; the girl really could cook. Everything went fast. Afterward, Dawson cupped a cigarette in his hand and listened to the night-song of frogs along the creek, thinking of the lonely years and of what lay ahead of him and of this one brief moment shared with Cherry Malotte.

"Dawson," she said quietly, "did you really kill a man in Texas?"

"So the law says. Kind of a wild fight one night at Lampasas, a bunch of drunk state troopers horning in on a dance. I don't know what actually happened—but a trooper turned up dead, and I got the blame."

"Was Illing there?"

"Yes. We were good friends, those days. Maybe Chase killed him; I've thought so, since he put it on me. No use wondering

now, though—because I went a little wild, with the law chasing me, and pulled a couple of hold-ups. Then I came to my senses and hit for the territory."

"Have you—done anything lawless since?"

He shook his head. "It's a fool's game, always with the same end. I've stayed honest, since those two slips. Not that it has done me any good, or ever will."

He rose. Such talk was useless. "Better turn in. I'll keep watch, in case Kyber comes calling."

She said, "What will you do if he does?"

Dawson shrugged. "Depends. On you, partly."

"The way you say that," Cherry said, "means you think I'll be glad to see him—because I love the man, or because I want to turn him over to Illing, for pay. Neither guess is true. I was in love with Dan Kyber once—but not now, nor ever again! As for Chase Illing, he didn't offer me a cent. Instead, he held a club over my head—"

Part of Neil Dawson listened in astonishment to these words. Another part was tensing with the alarm of the hunted. He bent, spilled a skilletful of water on the fire, dousing it, and put a gun in Cherry's hand.

"Somebody's heading this way. Maybe Kyber. Don't move or make a sound . . ."

CHAPTER FOUR

Startled Pleasure

HE KNEW a moment later it was more than one man. A pair of them, prowling along the bank, muttering together, searching the brush. Dawson gave silent thanks there was no moon.

Cherry was silent, close to him. Her breath fanned his cheek. She touched his arm, gripped it, hand steady.

Those two came up almost to the sheltering brush pile, had a low argument and went away. He heard them mount up and cross the creek, riding eastward into the night.

Cherry relaxed, sighing. "A good thing I have strong nerves!"

"Hush! Somebody else coming."

A lone rider approached, stopped maybe fifty feet away, and sat for some time in silence, as though listening hard. Then he hit the creek also, heading east.

Dawson was puzzled. "Those first two might have been Illing's men. But the one alone? Kyber, maybe? Or Lew Clark?"

"A Ranger wouldn't come north of the river, would he?" Cherry asked.

"Not supposed to. But, the way Texas is these days, sometimes they'll cross over, after a man they want real bad. Doesn't seem likely, though, Lew would follow me so far. I wonder, now—"

"What?" Cherry asked.

Dawson did not answer this. There was a nebulous idea in him that Chase Illing at Griddville might also explain Lew Clark's presence there. Illing could have overreached himself, and the Rangers might be after him. But it seemed unlikely, what with the political power he held in graft-ridden Austin.

Cherry still stood close to him. "We were talking about something when those men came along. Shall we go on?"

"Talk only tangles things up, Cherry."

"Not always. Dawson, what hold does Illing have on you? I know now there must be one—"

He told her. No point in withholding it, he thought.

"So he threatened your brother," Cherry said. "I might have guessed; that man knows how to hit a person where it hurts! In my case, it was my sister. . . ."

A night wind rustled the creek timber. Far off, a coyote yodeled quaveringly.

"Illing said I was Kyber's woman," Cherry continued, voice strained. "That was true—but not in the way it sounds. Three years ago, when I was just out of

a New Orleans convent school, I married Dan Kyber, after knowing him only two days. It was—a whirlwind courtship—"

Her hand, still on his arm, began to tremble. He sensed the deep emotion in her, bottled up until this moment, and saw how it could have been, if true—a young girl, younger even now than he would have guessed, swept off her feet. . . .

Her voice held the bitter ring of truth.

"I didn't know he was an outlaw," Cherry whispered. "We lived together in New Orleans only about a week. Then the law closed in, and Dan was almost taken. He shot his way free. I got away and back home, to Dallas—unrecognized, I thought. I've never seen him since. Now, my sister is being married, into a proud family, a famous one in Texas. If word were to get out of what I did—"

Dawson nodded. No need to elaborate. This was a time and a country where public displeasure fell hard on a woman whose step had faltered, even innocently. And Cherry's sister would be branded with the same displeasure. A strange thing, the coincidence of an approaching marriage and Illing's need of some means to put his hands on Kyber—but the sort of coincidence, Dawson thought wearily, that always seemed to turn up to help Illing's kind. It made him wonder if anyone could ever hope to get the best of such a man.

"How did he find out?" Cherry cried. "Dan didn't use his right name; there was no way Illing could know!"

"Kyber must have told him," Dawson said. "So they've been tied together. Money's involved, somehow—that's all that ever interests Chase. He got Kyber out of Fort Smith jail, probably intending to have him delivered in Texas. But Kyber must have had different ideas; looks like he's not anxious to meet Chase again. Chase saw how he could use you, and he sent for me. I wish I knew the stake they're playing for."

"Maybe you'll find out tomorrow," Cherry said. "Maybe we'll understand all this."

Maybe he would find out more than that. She had said she no longer cared for Kyber, and probably meant it—but that could change when she saw him again. . . .

NEXT morning, Sofer's Osage woman came through the creek timber at a furtive pace. Dawson went to meet her, and they talked briefly. He returned to Cherry Malotte.

"Kyber pulled out, last night, before Sofer got the message to him about us. He headed east—into the hills, I'd say. A man on the dodge could play hide and seek there quite a while."

"We're—following him?"

"Yes."

There was constraint between them again. Perhaps she regretted now the things she had said to him last night. Or it might be she knew that along toward dawn when she muttered brokenly in some bitter dream, dozing as she huddled against the brush, he had put an arm about her and pillowed her head against his shoulder. She had slept easily, then. So had he. When he awakened, with the sun high, she was silently fixing breakfast.

They rode through the silent land again, and were in the hills by midday.

It was a bleak country of weird rock formations, fantastically colored, the only high land between Texas and Kansas. The sun was scorching. "We'll look at the most likely place first," Dawson told Cherry Malotte, veering north.

They came to it at early afternoon, a spot where some nameless stream came snaking out of nowhere to leap a ledge and drop sheer a hundred feet into a pool surrounded by willows and cottonwoods. From a high spot southward a mile away, Dawson studied it with care. "Nobody there. He might have cut straight through, heading north to Prince's Post at the bluff crossing on the Canadian. That's close to

my place. Guess we'll have to go on, pick up fresh horses, and double back if he isn't at Prince's."

Cherry stirred. "Dawson, I can't stand myself much longer. Do you think there's time, perhaps, for me to have a quick bath?"

This obvious show of her confidence in him gave Dawson an odd sort of pleasure. "I guess so. I'll go ahead and scout that timber. You stay here until I signal it's safe to follow along."

When she joined him presently, he was waiting beside the pool. "No fresh sign among those trees." His spare gun was extended to her, butt foremost. "Put this on the bank, stay close to it—and hurry. I'll leave the horses here, keep looking around, and whistle when I come back."

She showed him a faint smile. "Thank you, Dawson . . ."

Maybe it had dissipated that constraint between them.

The overflow from the pool ran north. He followed its course, hugging cover, watching and listening. No need to feel particularly uneasy, this silent, somnolent day—still, at least three men had ridden into these hills last night. Where were they now?

He went about half a mile before turning back. He could see the horses, quietly grazing; then he saw first one, then the other, lift his head, with ears pricking up, looking toward the south. Dawson swore. Somebody had stayed back, following them in. He started to run. Cherry screamed; her gun cracked, two swift shots.

He sprinted through gravel toward the pool timber, saw a swiftly shifting shadow among the trees, and the wolfish face of the kid, Siggs. Gun-flame lashed at Dawson. He snapped a shot in reply; the kid blasted twice more at him, and Dawson dived belly-down into the lee of the some boulders that were piled up like bleached bones.

A flash of white showed, and was abruptly gone—Cherry running. The kid yelled, "There, Oden! Grab her!"

An answering bellow: "Tried to! She's slippery like an eel!"

Siggs looked from behind a tree at Dawson, gun swinging. Dawson, his own weapon steady, fired once, then rose and ran forward. Siggs was on his back, a surprised look on his face, a blue hole between his eyes.

Plunging through timber to the pool, Dawson found everything suddenly quiet again. That waterfall roared softly, sending spray high, with a rainbow imprisoned in it. He saw Cherry's clothes, neatly piled on the bank, some footprints she had left in sand, but no sign of her. Or of Oden, either.

The man couldn't have grabbed her and gotten clear. But he might be holding her, somewhere close, with a hand clamped over her mouth. Dawson felt killing rage at this thought, hunting fast and hard.

He came to a sort of chute dug from solid rock, down which that northward-running creek spilled from the pool, with some of those fantastically colored boulder formations piled high around it; he saw the shifting shadow and looked up, firing instantly.

ODEN, a dozen feet above him, sent a bullet back that gouged rock splinters at Dawson's feet, and then the man leaped down at him. There was savage collision, Dawson driven flat, the gun jolted from his fist.

He twisted, rolling clear, scrambling to recover his weapon. Oden, grunting and leaning down, his pock-marked face contorted, fired at point-black range, and burning powder-grains peppered Dawson's cheeks. He grabbed Oden's legs, dumping him on his back; Oden put one boot in his face and another in his chest, sending him off at a sideward stagger. Oden fired again, still on his back, a wide miss this time, and yet once more as Dawson, seeing he could never make it to his own gun, twisted and dived in at him, a hand stabbing for Oden's gun-wrist, his free fist slugging savagely.

Oden bucked with violence; they rolled over and over toward the chute, fighting for the gun, Oden showing galvanic strength and spitting wild profanity. He slammed another bullet. Dawson, rock under his back and the sun in his eyes, saw the gun above him, saw the rope-like veins in Oden's forehead and throat as he fought to turn it downward and in turn put all he had into keeping that muzzle away from himself. Five shots so far; there must be one more. He shook furiously, and the gun roared a final time.

Oden came down on him, a dead weight, sprawled there. Dawson twisted and pushed, surprised at the weakness he suddenly felt, and managed to squirm free. Resting for a moment on one knee, he sleeved sweat from his streaming forehead, gasping for breath, staring at what the final bullet had done to Oden's face.

He lifted himself and went to pick up his gun. That boot he had taken in his face had jarred his senses; he stumbled and sprawled at full length, swore at himself for being so clumsy, shook his head again, saw with clearing sight the gun, less than arm's length ahead of him, and lifted himself on an elbow, reaching out to pick it up.

A boot-heel came down on his groping hand, and pinned it against scorching rock.

Dawson tilted his head painfully, looking up. He saw the tallness of Dan Kyber above him, a scowl on the outlaw's dark face.

"Wiggle backwards," Kyber growled. "I'll take the gun."

A long-barreled Colt emphasized the command. Dawson obeyed, anger at himself knotted in him. All the care he had taken, the figuring he had done—and Kyber had caught him like he was a feckless kid.

"Now," Kyber continued, scooping up his weapon, "you can tell me what that fight was all about. I was catching a nap, up where the fall spills over—and I don't like popping guns waking me up!"

Bare feet pattered against rock. Cherry Malotte called anxiously, "Dawson! Are you all right?"

She had put on trousers and shirt; the latter clung to her damp body, emphasizing its firm contours. Cherry saw Kyber and stopped, eyes instantly enormous, one hand seeming to fumble at her shirt, the other outthrust as though to ward him off. Or maybe, Dawson thought, a gesture of suddenly awakened delight at seeing him again.

Kyber took three long strides, with a roar of startled pleasure that echoed through these wild hills. He swept her into his arms, a violent embrace that lifted her feet clear of the ground; he kissed her again and again.

Dawson put his arms down on his knees and his face against his arms, blotting out the sight. But there was no way to blot out the sound of it.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bloody Business

A FIRE blazed brightly on a wide rock ledge above the pool, with the intense blue of a clear sky on beyond. Cherry was fixing a meal for Kyber. The outlaw stood watching her—and Dawson, who sat weaponless nearby, sifting gravel between his fingers, in an attitude of listlessness. He had considered and discarded a dozen possible ways of getting past Kyber's Colt; now, he was working on another.

Cherry's head was averted. She had not looked at Dawson, had not spoken to him, since Kyber's appearance.

Kyber rolled a cigarette, malice mixed with amusement in his narrowed dark eyes. "Right generous of you to bring my wife to me, Dawson. I'm curious, though, to know why?"

Dawson was silent. Kyber snapped a match against his thumb-nail, and kept it burning after firing his cigarette. He sud-

denly flipped it at Dawson, who flinched as it scorched his face. "Speak, damn you!"

Cherry's wooden voice came from behind him. "Don't, Dan, please. It was Chase Illing who sent us, of course—and you know it."

"Sure," Kyber chuckled. "I'm remembering who shook me out of that Fort Smith jail. I just wanted your kind escort to tell me." He wheeled, clamping her arm with sudden savagery. "And if he tried anything with you, the time it took to get here, I'll blast him to rags!"

Cherry twisted her arm, freeing it. "Don't be a fool! And save your energy for Illing—he's after you!"

Kyber chuckled again. "He sure is! Chase wants a couple of words out of me, before he sees me dead—wants them worse than he's ever wanted anything! A quick answer, about something I left at Tornudas a while back. And damned if he's going to get it! But you and I are heading there, honey, soon as I can shake the marshals hunting me—"

Tornudas. This was the second time Dawson had heard that Brazos town mentioned; Illing had also spoken of it. Now Neil Dawson suddenly remembered gossip heard at an outlaw camp one night on the Cimarron of a daring one-man raid at Tornudas, only a couple of months ago, on a heavily-guarded coach carrying gold coin, a lot of it.

Political loot, the gossip had said, with bitter remarks concerning thieving carpetbaggers, whose depredations made the steals of brush outlaws seem like penny-snatching. Money gouged from the flesh and blood of Texas, being hustled to some safe place, north. And Kyber had grabbed it.

Dawson swore wearily at himself for taking so long to remember and piece things together. A good thing he hadn't continued on the lawless trail; he hadn't the kind of sharp, twisted wits needed for it.

"I knew Chase was after something big," he said, "and fifty thousand in coin gold sure fills the bill! Was it too heavy to carry away from Tornudas, Kyber, or were you chased too hard and fast?"

"Both. And shut up," Kyber growled, attention fixed on Cherry, greedily fixed; she hadn't yet put on the rest of her clothes. "Honey, hustle that grub. We're pulling out, quick as I've eaten. Just you and me. Chase's bird dog stays here . . ."

Dawson had gathered himself. It was now or never, while Kyber's gaze was still on the woman. He went at the outlaw, moving low and fast.

The man heard the crunch of his boots and whirled with pantherish speed, hand flashing into the fastest draw Neil Dawson had ever seen. Again gun-flame lashed at his face, and this time he felt a white-hot streak of pain, somewhere high. But he hit Kyber with a lift and twist of his body that bucked the man off his feet, and followed him down, driving one knee into his chest, grinding the other knee onto his forearm. Kyber's gun spun aside; Dawson went after it, grabbed it up, and whipped the weapon at Kyber. "My turn, now!"

The outlaw swayed to his feet, wild hate churning in him. Dawson watched him with grim tautness; he had the man, had him cold—and had a club now to swing at Illing.

Then his glance shifted on to Cherry, standing rigid, his face lined and pale. She was staring past him; her lips moved in a hurried warning: "Behind you, Dawson—behind you!"

He tasted gall that she should try this foolish effort to distract him, give Kyber a chance he would never have otherwise—and he heard moccasins whisper against rock. He twisted quarteringly, alert and ready; he grunted and relaxed.

John Bockman was coming across the ledge, a .50 calibre buffalo rifle casually leveled. "You picked a cozy spot for the wind-up, boy."

"What?" Dawson said. "Look, John,

you can be of some help. Put your gun on this lobo until I can tie up his hands—"

"He'll stay put," Bockman said. "So will that gal—and you. Throw me the iron, Dawson. Quick, or I'll blow your guts out!"

The truth hit with sickening force. He read it in Bockman's exultant, heavy-lidded stare, in the muzzle of that heavy rifle, fixed implacably on himself. He had won the game, and he had thrown it away. Cherry had seen which way the buffalo gun was pointing; she had tried frantically to warn him. Dawson wearily obeyed Bockman's command.

"I should have guessed!" he said, with bitter disgust for himself. "You're one of those Illing set to follow and watch us—to grab Kyber, when he showed. Well, call in the others!"

"Only one other," Bockman said, grinning. "We've been trailing you easy, all the way, just got here. And now, I draw my pay!" He whistled piercingly.

Chase Illing came from the fringe of trees at the south end of the pool, slapping a quirt against riding breeches, stamping dust from his boots. "Hello, Dan," he said casually, to Kyber. "That wasn't very nice of you, ducking out on my boys after I went to so much trouble to save you from hanging."

Then he slashed the quirt at Kyber's face, a vicious cut.

"Where did you leave that gold?" Illing snapped.

SILENCE for a moment, with that waterfall murmuring pleasantly in the background. Dawson wriggled his right shoulder. Only a muscle tear; the arm was not impaired. But he was pretty badly worn down. . . .

A bright weal showed against Kyber's dark cheeks. Red murder flared in his eyes. "Where you'll never put your paws on it, you damned bloodsucker! Always knew Texas would get sick of you, some day. And you're not using what's mine to buy yourself clear!"

"You thieving dog, that was my gold!" Illing cried. "And you were chased from Tornudas, hard and fast, riding light; I know you left it behind, in the ground. Whereabouts?"

Kyber was silent. Coiled and ready to explode, Dawson noticed; he was hoping Illing would step close for another swing of that quirt. But Illing drew back and slanted a sudden look at Cherry, standing frozen nearby. A wicked grimace tightened his lips.

"You told me how much you missed her, Dan. Always on the dodge, never a chance to find her again, driven half-crazy by remembering! Now, "—he lunged, hooked a hand into the collar of Cherry's shirt, and ripped it away from her shoulders—tell me where you buried that gold . . . or listen to her yell!" He lifted the quirt.

Kyber made an animal sound, but Dawson moved first, slanting across in front of the outlaw, driving headlong at Illing. Bockman screamed something; then his rifle blasted and Kyber, squarely in the way, was smashed flat by the terrific force of the buffalo gun's heavy slug. Dawson took the bite of Illing's quirt in his face to get his hands on the man. He whipped him around toward Bockman, trying to use Illing as a shield.

But too much fighting this day had leached his strength. He couldn't hold Illing, who squirmed and clawed, breaking free, scrambling aside. Bockman, a sheen of desperation on his face, fired again. Dawson dropped flat. The second slug screamed over his head.

And now this, he realized, was the end of the line for him. The man with the greasy braids could kill him twice over before he could cover the distance between them.

Then Cherry dipped a hand under her ruined shirt. "Neil, here!" His other gun came spinning across the ledge.

Dawson caught the weapon, gripped it, tilted it, all in one motion; he looked right into the muzzle of Bockman's rifle, with grim intent pulled trigger to kill—and did.

Illing was on the run, dragging a gun from under his coat. He threw a wild shot, fading into the trees. Dawson followed him.

Only two bullets left in the iron he held; he always left a chamber empty. Illing was lost to sight for a moment, then reappeared, slanting off to the south. Heading for his horse, likely; Dawson swerved to drive him back. Illing stopped, snapped another shot, and went into the timber again. Dawson was staggering, breathing hard. A horseman appeared, off to the left of both of them, looking tautly toward the waterfall and pool, head turned so he did not see Illing.

He was Lew Clark—and now the mystery of that lone rider last night was explained. Dawson tried to yell a warning, but could not even whisper. Illing sent a look back at him, measuring the distance between them, then put himself against a cottonwood, steadying his arm as he lined his gun directly at Clark. He desperately wanted the Ranger's horse—and Clark dead was the way he was picking to get it.

Dawson stopped also, with no time for careful sighting. The distance was long for a handgun; he had to let both bullets go, hoping for at least one hit. He saw Illing buckle, then twist around to look at him, lines smoothing out of his face, an expression there wrenchingly reminiscent of better, friendlier days. Illing spilled down, dead.

Clark had a Walker Colt in his fist, staring at Illing, then at Dawson. "Neil, guess I owe you something for that. . . ."

Cherry knelt, Kyber's head against her breast. She lowered it gently, standing, hugging the tattered shirt against herself. "He—told me, just at the last. Forty paces north on the east bank of the old Comanche Ford of the Brazos at Tornudas—"

"Illing's gold?" Clark said. "Well, Texas needs it; I'll have to get there in a hurry."

"Lew, did you hear me? I'm not going back with you!"

"A new day dawning, down there," Clark said, as though he had not heard that. "An honest governor soon at Austin, elected by the people again. And the likes of Illing getting what their crooked work has earned them. Ten times that gold he wanted so bad couldn't have bought him clear of Huntsville pen. I thought you were working with him, Neil—glad to find you weren't. He has been my sole assignment for quite a while; now I can report his case closed. Kyber's, too. Guess Texas also owes you something—"

"A hang-noose!" Dawson said bitterly, gun tight in his fist.

"If you go back, yes," Clark agreed, deliberately holstering his Colt. "But the west is big; pick yourself a corner of it a long ways off, and I've got a notion the charges against you will be allowed to die. Get started quick—a couple of U. S. marshals, hot after Kyber, were right behind me; they'll show here any minute." He grinned suddenly. "And load that gun—this country, you might need it."

Neil Dawson swallowed hard. Clark turned his back—and Cherry was there, coat on now, standing quietly. Dawson gestured with awkwardness. "Lew will see you back to Texas—"

The words stuck in his throat. He reached out fiercely, and she came with a rush into his arms, lips eager against his, the murmur of her voice for him alone: "Almost from the first moment I knew I'd never see Texas again—and didn't care!"

Then they were riding, Clark silhouetted behind them with hat waving in farewell, a warm breeze in their faces, the world open and free before them. And the long, full years ahead together, Dawson realized. He reached across for Cherry's hand, gripped it tightly, slowed their horses to a leisurely pace. This country, wild and menacing once, looked friendly to him now. ★ ★ ★

Her saying she loved him shocked him right to his boots.

Calico Princess

by Cy Kees

Bart Halliday alone could save Grangeton from the disaster that haunted it, but only a slim, red-lipped girl could save Bart Halliday from himself!

DURING his slow ride up Grangeton's single, dusty street, sitting tall and somber in the saddle, Bart Halliday felt the crowd's hostility pinpoint him, but he ignored them. They were poor losers, he thought, wanting to find a goat to blame and curse, so that they wouldn't have to face their own shortcomings.

By raging about his black past, they could take the sting from their own failure. It would soothe their pride when it came to facing the shattered dreams of their

wives and the broken trust of their children. Bart stifled a tight smile before it reached his lips.

Let the spineless saps blame him if it helped them any. He'd let them—even encourage it. Against them, his own spread was secure, as he himself was. The big black .45 riding at his right thigh made all the difference.

Angling toward the hitchrail, Bart spied Sally Benton talking with a group of them. Her full lips were soft, sympathetic, and often she smiled encouragement. Slow warmth climbed through his chest, as it always did when he looked at her. Studying her faded jeans and flannel shirt, he noted the fine, womanly dignity in the way she carried herself.

Sally stood to lose as much as any of them. Yet she took it on herself to comfort, to console where she could. While she was talking, Bart studied her.

Her dark hair crowned a wide, browned face. The over-sized shirt she wore made her chest seem boyish. Her legs were sturdy, filling the faded jeans. Nothing about her was particularly beautiful.

But gazing at her, Bart understood why his past life had seemed so useless, so empty. Sally Benton would fill that void, would alone make life worth living. But he didn't even dare dream of asking her to fill it. Sally glanced up, saw him, and an eager smile lighted her face.

"I'm afraid you picked a bad day to come to town, Bart," she said, coming toward him. "It's worse today than it is for a funeral."

Her calling him by his first name always shook him, and it did now. Bart nodded, and a smile came easily to his lips. "I got wind of it last night. Newbolt played it smart, buyin' up those mortgages."

"Is it smart—really?" Sally asked, sobering suddenly, and there was a thin edge of bitterness in her voice. "Is it ever smart to grind people under your feet—" Her voice broke off abruptly, and she bit the quiver out of her lower lip with strong white teeth.

Bart shrugged. "If you'd live for power like Newbolt does, it's the trail you'd want, too."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to bother you with it," she said quickly, not looking at him. "It doesn't concern you anyhow."

Bart Halliday caught the veiled accusation in her voice, and he hated it. Tensing, he bit back sharp words and let himself calm down before he tried to answer. Her friendship meant a lot to him, and he meant to hold it.

Quickly, Bart glanced around to see whether there was anyone within earshot. Hard eyes met his, but nobody came close. He faced Sally again, amazed by the depth in her dark eyes.

"Sally, except for you there isn't a person here I can call friend," he said evenly. "Because I rode the outlaw trail once, they've made life just as miserable as possible. So why should I care what happens to them?"

"You didn't try very hard." Sally smiled a little, maybe to take the sting out of the words—or maybe because it didn't make any difference to her anyhow. "When some of them tried to be friendly, you were so hard and short, they couldn't like you."

"I can read eyes," Bart said curtly. "They were either scared, or they wanted some of the loot I was supposed to have hid out before I went to prison."

"Maybe. And maybe you just look too close."

THE bank door opened right then. The crowd made a rush for it, trying to be the first inside, as if they might get the loan they needed if they were the first, before the money ran out.

But none of them would get it, Bart thought. Banker Caleb Jacobson would never have turned the mortgages over to Newbolt if he hadn't needed money badly

to keep the bank from going under. Newbolt had played it shrewd, waiting till conditions were so desperate he could make an all or none deal.

Still studying him, Sally Benton turned away, toward the bank. "I guess I ought to get in line," she said slowly, with the lack of spirit which told him she knew it wasn't much use anyhow. She started away, moving with easy grace in the faded clothes.

"Sally?" Bart called. He didn't look at her now. "If you want help, you don't even have to ask for it. You know that. I'm offering it."

When he looked up, she was smiling oddly, but shaking her head, no. "I guess you know I couldn't do that, Bart." She leveled her gaze on him then. "Not just for myself. But if you were to offer it to all of—" She broke off, flushing. "That's terribly ungrateful of me, isn't it?"

Bart didn't know what to answer. With the blurted suggestion, she had put pressure on him. Pressure she would have known he wouldn't stand under.

"I'm sorry," he muttered finally. "No can do."

With a last, rueful smile, Sally turned away, moved toward the end of the line in front of the bank. But already, men were milling away, grumbling, and Bart knew Jacobson had given them a group answer. Nothing doing.

Cursing the banker, they headed down street. A few broke off at the nearest saloon. But most of them only cast longing eyes at it and turned away.

Too broke to pay for a drink, Bart thought, and their credit would be shot now. It was the same old story, of ranchers trying to get a ranch started on too thin a shoestring.

If they had had a good year now, the strong ones would have pulled through. But two lean years in a row was too much for them. That and a landhog named Hig Newbolt.

With the new worry loading their minds, the ranchers headed back for their spreads again. A quarrel broke out near the saloon. A rangy, slack-eyed young rancher wanted to go into the saloon, and his wife was doing her best to keep him out, to get him home. Bart frowned slightly, watching them.

She was a young girl, little more than a child, cute in snug new jeans. She tugged at her husband's arm.

"You promised me you wouldn't," she kept saying. She said it like she was more worried about his breaking his word than about the money that would be spent.

"Aw, just one, honey. . . ."

"I know all about your 'just one.'" She had his back to the saloon now. "You promised me you wouldn't. You know we can't afford it now."

Glaring at her, then grinning, he took her arm and moved away to a buckboard. "Don't you worry now," he said, swaggering a little as he guided her along. "We'll make out."

She looked at him trustfully and walked closer to him. "Gee, you don't have to tell me, Willie. I know we will."

According to the facts, it was false courage, and Bart smiled wryly. The man might fool her for awhile, making up his lack of backbone with gab. But it wouldn't take many years before she found out she had entrusted her life to a weakling.

Unaccountably, the thought saddened him, and he looked away from the pair. Over by the store fronts, older, work-bent women weren't responding to the faint attempts to raise their spirits. They had probably heard too many hopeful promises that died in the face of hardship.

Bart eyed the saloon, debating whether he should have a drink The prospect of hearing more grumbling decided him against it. He hung around awhile longer, but Sally Benton didn't show up again.

She was the only real reason he'd had for coming to town. He had known she

would be here. Bart scowled. The way things stood between them now, she was no reason at all.

If she had only had some shortcoming, some flaw he could have concentrated on, he might have tried to win her long ago. If she had been wild, he could have forgiven easily. He had been wild himself. If she had been plain, he would have felt he was making up for his own shoddy past by loving her all the more for it.

But she was made perfectly for him, and for that very reason he didn't deserve her. Or even dare to show his feeling for her.

Shrugging, Bart wheeled his horse and rode out again. His horse's hooves made plopping sounds in the thick dust. The sun beat down out of a cloudless sky. Their was no sign yet of the drought breaking.

It wouldn't matter for the rest of them anyhow, Bart thought. He almost wished it would never rain here again. He would lose himself, but so would Hig Newbolt. And that would serve the big pig right. Just then, glancing ahead, Bart spotted Newbolt's dumpy figure coming a half mile up the road.

AS USUAL, Banty Ellis rode a few feet behind Newbolt, his wapish, gun-hung figure looking mean even at that distance. Swiveling in his saddle, Newbolt said something back to his gunhand.

"Probably tellin' him to hold his damned temper," Bart muttered, grinning.

Not caring to make any pretense of friendship, he dropped his right hand down to his .45, curled his thumb over the hammer. Coming closer, a grin split Newbolt's florid face.

"Howdy, neighbor," he said, raising his right hand in a sickly try at being friendly. "Heard there's quite a bit of excitement in town today. Kind of a hot place right now, eh?"

Newbolt's wheedling information irritated him almost as much as the stocky man's show of friendliness. But Bart forced a cold smile.

"That's right," he said evenly, staring right into the watery blue eyes. "They claim there's some wild sow around here wantin' to take over the whole country."

The grin dissolved on Newbolt's heavy face. The watery eyes grew icy, speculative. "I guess you know by now, Halliday, I don't like you overly much." Newbolt glared. "But if a man tries to be friendly, don't throw it back in his face."

"If you want to make tough talk, next time I'll follow it with a couple fists."

"No, he won't," Banty Ellis broke in ominously. "Not while I'm along, he won't."

"And you'll always be right there, like a tick on a fat steer," Bart said, turning to the waspish fighter. The man's roily brown eyes went blank, but he kept his hands on the saddle horn, away from his sixguns.

"You talk a lot," Ellis said shortly.

"Talked a lot last time you showed up at my ranch," Bart said, needling him. "And you left there so fast the dust hung in the air three days."

"Why, damn you. . . ."

"Cut it, Banty," Newbolt snapped.

The waspish rider mumbled something, then looked away. Bart turned his attention back to Newbolt, and for just an instant, spotted narrowed speculation in the man's eyes. An ugly glitter it was, greedy and determined.

Then the eyes rounded again, and Newbolt was shrugging. "Can't say I didn't try to get along." Jerking his head at the gunman, Newbolt rode on.

Out of the corner of his eye, Bart kept tabs on the pair until they were out of sight. Uneasy thoughts filled him when he recalled Newbolt's study of him. But he shook them off and reached the fork where Newbolt's trail split from his own.

When he reached the ranch, it was nearing noon, hot and sultry. While his grub cooked on the kitchen range, Bart looked

out of the single kitchen window at his holdings.

It wasn't too much, in comparison with Newbolt's, but he was contented with it. And it was well backed with the money he had in Jacobson's bank.

He didn't have many outer buildings, but they were newly rebuilt and secure. His barnyard a hundred feet away was well-filled, and it was walled tight. His three room house gave him more living space than he really needed. Made it seem all the lonelier. . . .

Shaking his head, Bart broke off those thoughts. It had bothered him more and more the past months—ever since he had noticed how friendly Sally Benton was to him. Bart scowled.

Someday he was going to catch Sally alone and try to explain something to her. It would mean a lot to him.

He wanted to tell her that every cent he had put into this ranch had been earned honestly. It didn't matter that every other person in the world believed different, Sally would take his word for it.

It was funny, he thought, sitting down to a lonely meal at his kitchen table. The big money was supposed to be made on the owlhoot trail. Everybody knew it wasn't easy money, but it was supposed to be big money, even if it did cause even bigger headaches.

And yet he had been flat broke when he had ended his outlaw career by going to Texas State Prison. People didn't realize how much money it took to keep a holdup gang going.

It was hard on horses, and you didn't steal the horses, like some people believed. Not if you weren't a damned fool. You bought them, good horses, at high prices because it was more risky to steal a horse to cover the distances than it was to pull another holdup and buy them.

You had to keep on buying supplies, even when you had to lay low for a month. That and shells, guns, doctor bills —it had all added up so high, he could never lay any money away. Bart grinned ruefully. Maybe they had picked the wrong spots to jump.

It was when he tried honest work after serving his term that he had made money. Jumping into Washington Territory at the first news of a gold strike, he had been among the first miners there.

Most of them struck it rich, and he did too. But most of them stayed and lost it—to road agents, to gamblers, or in a dozen other ways. But he had skipped farther south and bought this ranch.

He would tell Sally, and he would hope she believed him. He was washing down the meal with black coffee when he heard a horse coming.

QUICKLY, he jumped to the kitchen window, peered out. He smiled and relaxed. Then he walked on out of the back door, to meet Sally Benton. She stayed on the horse, smiling when she refused his invitation to step down.

"I know it won't take you long to say no," she said, shifting uneasily in the saddle. "But I just had to ask you once more. You wouldn't—" She broke off, coloring deeply. "What I asked you this morning?"

Bart shook his head, almost irritated by her persistance. Why didn't someone else come and ask?"

"I was the only one who believed you might do it."

"You—believed?"

Sally nodded. A flush grew steadily deeper in the broad planes of her face, reddening the tan so much Bart knew she was painfully embarrassed. He tried to think of something to say to relieve it, but couldn't. And she wouldn't look at him.

"Sally, would you believe something else, if—because I told you?"

"If I knew you were serious, yes."

"This ranch, everything you see here,

I made it all honestly." Bart stared at her, knowing she couldn't believe. They all thought it came from the loot he'd garnered while riding the outlaw trail. "I made it up in the gold fields," he added, uncertainly.

"Sure, I believe you, Bart," she said, eyeing him steadily.

It baffled him that it could come so easy. "You do?" He stared up at her. "Could you tell me—why?"

"Because I love you."

It shocked him right to his boots, the simple answer. Bart swallowed hard, and he couldn't believe. He tried hard, but he couldn't believe.

"Sally, I wish you'd said that before—before you tried to get money for those other ranchers."

Bart hated himself for saying it, and it hurt her. It showed in the tautness of her lips, in twin white spots high on her cheeks. But Sally didn't flare up. Just studied him.

"You said this morning you can read eyes." Her voice was oddly husky. "Read mine, Bart, and tell me what you see there."

Moving closer, Bart looked up. Sally had to blink tears out of them first. Then he looked at them, and then he knew.

He didn't believe she loved him, or think she loved him—Bart *knew*, absolutely, that she did. There was no room for any doubt.

He had always been amazed at the depth in them. And suddenly, he remembered not noticing it at first. It was loving him that made them that way. . . .

"I've been a fool," he said hoarsely. "Sally—you know I'll do it. Sure. Spread the word. I'll try to tide them over."

"Thank you, Bart. I'll be back later."

It was all she said, before she reined around and rode off. But the words made him happier than any he had ever heard in his life. Grinning, shaking his head over the wonder of it, Bart started choring around the ranch, killing time till he would see Sally again.

His decision would cause a lot of excitement around this range, Bart decided. With the threat of foreclosure gone, the ranchers could work again, fight again, to hold their ranches. He thought of the slender young girl who had kept her husband out of the saloon, and he smiled.

Maybe, somehow, she would be able to keep believing in him. He could almost see the slack-lipped young rancher swaggering over to her and saying, "See, I told you we'd make out."

And Newbolt. Bart grinned. Newbolt's eyes would have good reason to get watery when he found out about this.

The afternoon dragged by, and it seemed like an eternity before he heard hoofbeats again. Grinning, Bart ran out around his haybarn. Looking down the road, he scowled.

Hig Newbolt was leading off, Banty Ellis a few feet behind, as usual. "Damn!" Bart exploded. "Next time I run them out of here, they'll never stop."

Newbolt reined in, and his fat face was far from pretty. He glared, motioning Banty Ellis up alongside.

"I just heard you were going to lend money to those two-bit ranchers, Halliday." His thick lips quivered. "That right?"

"That's right," Bart said, grinning tightly. "No interest, twenty years to pay."

Watching close, Bart spied the look in Newbolt's watery eyes again, greedy—murderous! And suddenly it scared him. Jerking his .45 he leveled it at them, taking no chances.

AT THE same instant, their hands were dipping downward toward their holstered guns. "Hold it!" Bart snapped. He eyed Newbolt with something close to surprise. "Hig—you damned snake, you were going to gun me down then!"

"Don't be a fool, man," Newbolt

growled. But the frustration, the guilt, was written all over his heavy face.

"You got two minutes flat to get outta sight," Bart rasped, flaring with fury. "If I can see you then, I'll pot you!"

They wheeled their horses, and Bart watched them hawkishly as they rode away. Too late, he saw the signal from Newbolt. Before he could fire, they cut their horses behind the cover of his haybarn.

Chilling, Bart lunged back through the door, crouched behind the single kitchen window. He still couldn't quite believe that they would have gunned him down on the spot. But it was true.

That told him something else, and Bart winced at the thought. If he had let the rest of the ranchers go under, Newbolt would never have been satisfied until he had swallowed up the only other ranch in the area. Bart's ranch.

Trying not to make a target, Bart peeled his eyes on the haybarn. He spotted movement on both sides. Each had taken one corner of it, were waiting for a move from him.

A spot of dust appeared far down the road, grew larger. Bart stared at it, not quite realizing at first what it meant. Then he knew, and he groaned.

Trying to recognize the distant figure, he hoped desperately that it wasn't her, that it was someone else. But it was a shallow hope. He wasn't even surprised when he made out her straight compact figure in the saddle.

"Damn!" Bart groaned. "What'll I do?"

Newbolt's watery blue eyes would be on her, calculating. Blinded out of decency by his greed, Newbolt would use her to keep him from fighting. And then . . .

Bart shook his head hopelessly. Newbolt wouldn't dare let either of them go alive. He would dig some plan out of his filthy head to make it look like murder and suicide—or worse.

People would believe it willingly about Bart Halliday. "Well, you know," they would say, shaking their heads, "once an outlaw. . . ."

Then a thought hit him suddenly, and Bart raced for the door. *They would be watching her too.*

Slipping through the door, he charged across the yard, trying to land softly on the balls of his feet. Rounding the haybarn, he eared the hammer on his gripped Colt.

Banty Ellis whirled on him, eyes flaring, leveling both his sixguns. Bart dropped hammer, his sights squarely on the middle of the bony chest. The Colt bucked in his hand, and the slug slammed heavy, driving the waspish gunman flat to the ground.

Glancing to the far side of the barn, Bart flung himself sideways against the leveled threat of Newbolt's gun. The screaming bullet burned his hair, and he thumbed hammer, twice, three times.

They all struck home with the ugly splat of lead hitting soft flesh. Newbolt crumpled.

Turning his back on them, Bart holstered his gun, and he hurried to Sally. After calling his name, she sat in the saddle, pale, round-eyed—but smiling. Before he said anything, Bart led her horse out of sight of the bodies.

Helping her dismount, he caught and held her. In his arms, she felt as he had always dreamed she would. Just right.

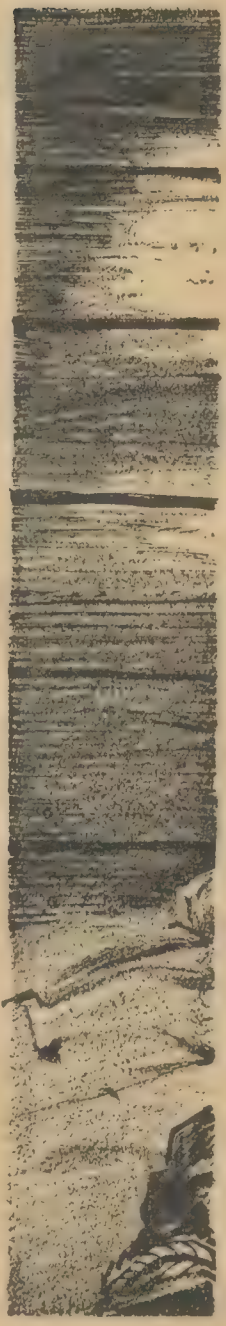
It came to him suddenly, this gunfight had been inevitable, with a man of Newbolt's greed. But if Sally hadn't used her love to force his hand, it would have come later, when Newbolt controlled everything else.

And Newbolt would have done it at his leisure, with a stealthy ambush somewhere out on the range. Bart held Sally closer and never wanted to let her loose again, not even for a minute.

"You—you saved me, Sally. Whether you know it or not, I owe my life to you."

Her breath flowed, warm against his ear. "Bart—all I want is what's left of it."

★ ★ ★



Queen for a Maverick!

by J. L. Bouma

THE sun was hot against Martin Daly's back. He could feel it burning through his shirt as he rode down the trail, leading the pack horse. He liked the dry heat, the coppery look of the mountains. At times like this he could almost forget his reason for living in Arizona.

The trail twisted past a giant boulder, and Martin saw Ben Sloan's burro feeding on the grass surrounding the spring near the old prospector's cabin. Smoke rose in a lazy gray curl from the rock chimney, and Martin saw horses in the nearby shed. He reined in, wondering whether Betty Johnson and a couple of her riders had stopped by to palaver with Ben. She usually rode this way once a week to see that the old man was all right. Martin felt his mouth tighten, remembering her anger the last time he'd talked with her, and he was about to turn his horse when a slender man in a black hat came

Two women bound Martin Daly captive—one, the hated memory of a long-dead betrayal; the other, a vibrant ranch queen who asked him to die!

"When Bob was killed," she said, "I wanted to stop living. . . ."

from the cabin and headed for the shed.

The man glanced up and saw Martin, and he whirled and slapped a hand to his holstered gun. Martin saw the star on his denim jacket, and he rode forward. "Ben around?" he asked.

The man stared at Martin suspiciously out of pale eyes. He had a lean face and blonde hair that curled around his ears. "Who the hell are you?" he asked.

Martin told the man his name, and the man stared at him for a long moment without answering. Then he said, "Where you heading?"

The question annoyed Martin. "To town for supplies," he said shortly. "I thought I'd stop by and see if Ben needs anything. He around?"

"He ain't here."

Martin turned his head as a second man appeared in the doorway. He was a big man with a fleshy face covered with beard stubble, and his large dark eyes held a vague, puzzled look as if he didn't quite understand what he was doing there. "Who is he, Kirby?" he asked, gazing at Martin, who noticed that this man wasn't wearing a star.

"I'm trying to figure," Kirby said. "Look, Daly, or whatever the hell you said your name is, did you see any sign of riders on your way here?"

"No. You fellows part of a posse?"

"What the hell does it look like to you?"

Martin looked at him. A hardcase lawman, he thought. Or maybe just some puncher that had been deputized, and the star made him feel tough. "Where'd Ben go, do you know?" he asked.

He caught the big man's brief glance toward the shed, but when he looked that way he couldn't see anything out of the ordinary except what appeared to be a freshly-turned spot in the sandy earth.

"How the hell would I know where that old guy went?" Kirby said, grinning faintly now. "You known him a long time?"

"The year I've been up here," Martin said. "Old Ben's been living and prospecting up here for the past twenty years."

"He ever strike it rich?"

"Not that I know of, but always hoping," Martin said vaguely. "I guess about all he ever made was eating money, like me."

"You prospecting?"

"That's right." He paused. "You see Ben before he left?"

Kirby grinned. "Tell him, Jake. Did we ever see the old buzzard?"

"Hell, no," Jake said.

Martin looked from one to the other. Something was wrong. "Then how do you know he's old?" he asked.

"Oh, we heard, Daly. We're after a couple of cons that busted out of the Yuma prison." He leaned over to slip a hand inside his boot and scratch his ankle, watching Martin all the while. "Yeah," he said, "a couple of cons busted loose. We heard in town there was an old guy living up this way, so we come here. You sure you didn't see no strangers the last couple days?"

"Not for the past month. There's not many ride these hills except a cowboy now and then who's looking for strays."

"Ranch close by, huh?"

"Hour's ride. The Bar-S. Mrs. Johnson runs it. Some of her men might be able to help you out." Martin picked up the reins. "Well, I'll be getting along—"

"Hold up!" Kirby said. And then, "Jake, I think we got company. He'd sure enough hear about us in town, and we ain't ready to travel."

"I reckon he would at that," Jake said. "Light down, mister."

"You'd better make that plainer," Martin said coldly.

"I heard Jake, and it was plain enough," Kirby said. He drew his gun and motioned with it. "Now get the hell down!"

MARTIN stared at him. "You know what you're doing?"

Kirby just grinned, and Martin glanced quickly across his shoulder because he

sensed Jake coming up behind him. But he was too slow, and Jake grabbed him and jerked him from the saddle, and he hit the ground with a solid thud that knocked the breath out of him.

"Get up!" Kirby said curtly. "When I tell you to do something, I mean for you to do it."

Martin got to his feet, more bewildered than anything else. Jake looked at him and said plaintively, "I wish to hell he'd been on his way back with supplies, instead of heading for town."

"Yeah," Kirby said. He glanced up. "Listen, you'd better douse that fire before somebody sees the smoke and heads this way."

"I got some water heating for Webb. We got to do something about him, like getting that bullet out."

"I'd just as soon he croaked," Kirby said disinterestedly.

"That's a helluva thing to say!" Jake said. "He helped us, didn't he?"

"Yeah, but he's no help now," Kirby said. "You know anything about doctoring, Daly?"

"No," Martin said, wishing he'd brought a gun. But a gun was one thing he never took with him to town.

Kirby said, "Watch him, Jake." He unstrapped Martin's saddlebags and looked inside, then went to check the canvas strapped to the pack horse. He led the horses to the shed.

Martin looked at Jake, who had a worried frown on his beefy face. "What's this all about?" Martin asked. "If you fellows are deputies, why do you want to keep me here?"

"We ran into a little trouble," Jake said absently. "The old man didn't like our looks—"

"There you go, shooting off your mouth!" Kirby said angrily, coming over. "Why the hell don't you shut up?"

"I was just telling him—" Jake began.

"Where is he?" Martin asked sharply. "What in hell did you do with him?"

"All right, so you got to know, and I'll tell you because then you'll maybe smarten up a little bit and not give us no trouble," Kirby said flatly. "We had to shoot him, but not before he put a bullet in Webb. If you want to see the old buzzard you'll have to dig him up." He jerked his head at the fresh mound of sand. "He was beginning to stink in this heat."

"Jake—Kirby—" a weak voice called from inside.

Jake went inside, and Kirby motioned Martin to follow. The cabin was small and had two rooms. The wounded man lay on one of the bunks. He was thin, stripped to the waist, and a blanket covered the lower part of his body. His face was pale and beaded with sweat. The clumsy bandage low on his right shoulder was soaked with blood. His eyes held the glaze of a sick man's, and his voice came with a hoarse effort. "You got to take a chance and go after a doc."

"Hell, man, we can't take that chance, you know we can't," Kirby said. "You'll be all right once we get the bullet out."

"If there was some drinking liquor in the place, I could stand it," Webb said, gazing glaze-eyed at the ceiling.

"We could knock you out," Kirby grinned.

Webb turned his head slowly, and just as slowly his hand moved under the blanket and became still. He moistened his lips, his breathing ragged. "You said out there you wished I'd croak—" he began plaintively.

"Hell, I was just joking," Kirby said roughly. He went over and leaned his elbows against the rough-stone fireplace, and kicked absently at the stones with the toe of his scuffed boot. "One of us has got to go into town after supplies," he said. "Ain't but two cans of tomatoes and a handful of flour left." He kicked harder and added savagely, "You'd think the old buzzard would have some grub around the place! Or some gold!"

"Plenty deer tracks out by that spring," Jake said, scratching his nose. "Likely be game there come evening."

Kirby turned. "A damn deer would spoil on us in a day," he said angrily. "We got to get some beans and stuff, enough to last us for the week it's gonna take us to get out of this damn country. You got any tobacco?" he asked Martin.

Martin fingered the makings out of his shirt pocket and tossed it over. Kirby caught it, still looking at him. "You got any money on you?" he asked.

"A few dollars."

They searched him and found the money, as well as the small poke of dust he'd spent three months worrying out of the earth. Kirby grinned. "That's as good as cash money in any language," he said. "You sure the old man didn't have some dust hid away?" he asked Martin.

"Why the hell don't you look?"

"We did," Kirby said, bouncing the poke in his hand.

Jake was watching him. "We gonna split it three ways, ain't we?" he asked.

"You got a place to spend it?" Kirby grinned. "Don't worry, Jake, it's safe with me."

JAKE looked at him. A slow grin spread across his face, but it never quite reached his eyes. "Sure," he said. "It ain't hardly enough to bother about."

Kirby put his head on his arms, again kicked at the stones. "You'd think the old buzzard would have at least a little dust hid around, wouldn't you? But there ain't even a sign. Strikes me as being damn funny."

"I could use a drink," Jake said heavily. "You were right, Kirby—one of us has got to go into town."

"The best thing would be to leave around dark," Kirby said. "It's about an hour's ride, and you won't likely meet a posse in the evening."

"You mean me, Kirby?" Jake asked. "Maybe somebody would know me. huh?"

"Hell, why should they? We're a couple hundred miles from Yuma, ain't we? Anyhow, you could take Daly's horse, and if anyone asks you can tell them you're out prospecting with him. Listen—"

Webb moaned suddenly, and they all turned to look at him. He clawed at the bandage, moving his head restlessly. Martin put a hand on his forehead. It was hot as fire. The skin around the wound had a shiny, swollen look, and was an angry red. "He'll die of blood poison sure as hell unless you get that bullet out," Martin said.

"I thought you were gonna do it, Jake," Kirby said. "You was heating the water to do it."

"He said he couldn't stand it."

"If we hold down he'll have to stand it," Kirby said. "You want to help us, Daly?"

Martin started to say hell-no, and then remembered the way Webb's hand had fumbled under the blanket. "All right," he said.

Kirby put his hand against the kettle that hung from the hook in the fireplace, and drew it back fast. "Still plenty hot enough," he said. "Let's have your pig sticker, Jake."

Kirby swished the knife around in the hot water. Martin straddled Webb on the bunk, pressing Webb's legs down with his backsides, and reached for his wrists. Webb moaned and made a feeble effort at resistance. He's half out, Martin thought. He felt the outline of the gun under the blanket.

"You hold his head down, Jake," said Kirby. "Put one hand against his chest here, and hold damn tight."

Martin bent over a little, on his knees straddling Webb. The gun lay along Webb's thigh, and he had to reach backhanded for it. He got hold of it all right and started to jerk it out when Kirby sensed that something was wrong, and Kirby lunged across him, grabbing for his

wrist. "Jake!" he roared. "Grab him! He's got Webb's gun!"

Martin lashed out at Kirby with his free hand, catching him in the mouth, still holding the gun awkardly with his other hand. Webb screamed beneath them. Then Jake clubbed him behind the ear, then jerked him upright, half ripping the shirt from his back. Kirby took hold of the gun and stood up. There was blood on his mouth, and a wild grin in his eyes. He looked at Jake. "You knew Webb had it there, didn't you?"

"What the hell?" Jake said, plainly puzzled. "He asked me for it, and I give it to him. Why the hell shouldn't he have his gun?"

"Because he'd as soon shoot us as not if he thinks we mean to run out on him."

"Hell, he's my cousin," Jake said. "He wouldn't shoot us. Give him back his gun, Kirby."

"Sure, I'll give it back," Kirby said, that wild grin still in his eyes. He thumbed the cylinder to one side, and ejected the shells which he stuck in the pocket of his denim jacket. He tossed the gun on the bunk. "All yours, Webb."

Without warning, he swung and smashed a fist into Martin's face. "That's for hitting me," he said flatly. "Don't ever try it again. I told you, didn't I? You want to share a grave with the old buzzard?" He bent down for the knife that had fallen to the floor. "Let's get on with it."

He took the bandage off. The wound was an ugly black pucker. Kirby appeared undecided. "I don't know how the hell I'm gonna do this," he said.

Webb had passed out completely. Jake looked down at him. "Dig down till you hit it," he said vaguely. "Then scoop it out."

"All right," Kirby sighed.

It seemed to take a long time. Webb started to scream the moment the knife entered, and he fought like a cornered wildcat. Kirby finally dug the bullet out and held the chunky bit of lead up with a look of triumph. "Just call me Doc Kirby, gents," he said. "I guess what I'd better do now is shove some tobacco down that hole."

Afterward he put on a clean bandage, ripping up the only white shirt Ben had owned. And Jake said anxiously, "You think he'll live, Kirby?"

"How the hell do I know?" Kirby said, looking distastefully at his bloody hands. He stripped gingerly out of his denim jacket, tossed it on the other bunk. "All I know is he ain't gonna be able to ride for a spell." He glanced at Martin. "Watch him while I go wash up."

HE WENT out. Martin looked down at Webb who had passed out again. Then he went over to sit on the other bunk. Jake watched him and said, "So you're a prospector."

"That's right."

"You must be loco, stuck away out here all by yourself."

"I like it."

Jake grunted, losting interest.

"Where'd Kirby get that star?" Martin asked him. He shoved one hand under Kirby's jacket, leaning back on the bunk.

"Got it in Yuma, when we were stealing the horses," Jake said.

"You and him bust out of the prison there?"

"Yeah," Jake said. "Webb here—he's my cousin—he helped us. Me and him was rustling a few cows, and I got caught. Judge gimme ten years. But I wasn't in that old prison six months before this guard come to tell me Webb was outside trying to get me out. Only I couldn't keep it to myself. Kirby, he slept next to me down in that hole on the straw. I told him Webb had got to the guard, and that the guard was fixing to let us bust out.

"We used to go to work there long before daylight, on account of too many guys croaked working in the heat. I told the guard about Kirby. He didn't like Kirby,

and Kirby hated his guts, but he said he'd fix it if Webb would pay him some more money.

"Well, the guard fixes it for one morning early. He was to take us off near the river, so after they take the leg irons off us, and feed us, we go down there with him carrying a couple lanterns. The only thing I don't know is how much Kirby hates the guard's guts, so I'm surprised when he takes a length of chain from under his shirt and breaks the guard's skull with it.

"But there wasn't much time to think about that. We took his gun and got across the river where Webb was waiting with a change of clothes and horses. We figured to go around Yuma, but we had some bad luck on account of they find that guard right away. They was coming at us from all directions, so we headed straight through Yuma.

"It was getting light about then, and this deputy spots us. The others was still a little ways behind, so I reckon he wasn't sure at first who we was, just suspicious, kind of. But we didn't figure to take any chances, so when he got up close Kirby shot him. Then he got down and ripped the star from his shirt and pinned it on himself. That's where he got the star," Jake said.

Martin fingered the shells out of Kirby's pocket, hesitated and put all but two back, in case Kirby noticed there weren't any. "Then you came straight here?" he asked, getting up and moving to a chair.

"We hid out close by for a couple days, but they got on to us and we had to make another run for it," Jake said. "Then we run out of grub, and this morning we saw smoke from this cabin. The old man watched us coming. I guess he didn't like our looks, so next thing we know he's holding a gun on us and telling us to get the hell off his property. All we wanted was some grub, not kill the old man. We maybe could've talked him out of some grub, but Kirby had to go for his gun right away. Well, he hit the old man, but the old man got lucky and put a bullet through Webb." Jake paused, then added morosely, "That Kirby's handy with a gun. Too damn handy."

"If I was you I'd be on the move," Martin said. "There's bound to be a posse ride up this way."

"We just can't up and leave Webb."

"I'd take care of him."

"What kind of bull is he trying to feed you?" Kirby said, coming inside. He sat on the bunk and felt of the pockets of the denim jacket, looking at Jake.

"Says if we make a run for it he'll take care of Webb."

"I reckon he would," Kirby said dryly. He got up and went over to lean against the fireplace, and he kicked absently at the stones. "I reckon he would climb on his horse and ride hell-bent for town, that's about what he'd do."

"We couldn't leave Webb," Jake said. "I told him that."

"We could if we had some grub," Kirby said.

"If we had some grub we could hole up here a couple weeks, huh, Kirby? Maybe by that time—"

"Shut up!" Kirby said sharply. He kicked at a rock. "Listen—" Taking his gun by the barrel, he tapped the rock. It made a hollow sound. He tapped another rock. "Hear the difference?"

"Yeah," Jake said, wonder in his voice.

"Gimme that knife," Kirby said in a tight voice. His hands trembled with excitement when he took it. "I figured there was something fishy," he muttered. "Old prospector, and not a sign of dust in the place. I had a hunch he'd have some hid away. By God, she's coming loose!"

HE HAD slipped the blade under the rock that made a hollow sound when he'd tapped it. It was about the size of a small plate, and he worked it out slowly.

Then he reached in the hole, his arm disappearing to the elbow. A thin film of sweat shone on his face.

Finally he pulled his arm out, and put a leather poke on the floor. Then he reached in again. Jake swore softly. "How many in there, Kirby?" he asked.

Kirby did not answer. He brought out another poke, then another. Finally, there were eighteen leather pokes swollen with dust stacked at his feet. "That's it," he muttered.

Jake was on his knees, fingering the pokes. "Look how old some of 'em are, Kirby. Leather all cracked. And some of 'em you can see are just put in there."

He opened one of the pokes and spilled a little dust into his hand. Kirby watched him closely. "There's enough there to buy a damn bank," he said. He glanced at Martin. "Didn't he ever tell you he had all this dust?"

Martin shook his head slowly. "I don't get it. He was always talking about clearing out and living high in some city when he made a strike."

"It's a strike for us," Kirby grinned. "You know what this is?" he asked. "It's twenty years of prospecting, that's what it is. Didn't you say he'd been up here that long?"

"Over twenty years."

"I bet he kept out just enough to live on," Kirby said. "The rest he hid away, damned old fool."

"By God, all that gold and we haven't even got a bottle," Jake said in an awed voice.

"You can buy the best now, Jake," said Kirby. "Look, why don't you go—"

Webb's moan cut him short. They turned to look at him. His face was pasty, his eyes dull and sunken in shadow pools. "Get the bullet out?" he asked weakly.

"Damn right," Kirby said. "Look, Webb,"—he held up one of the pokes—"Gold. The old man's. He had it hid behind a rock in the fireplace."

Webb's eyes showed brief interest, then became dull again. "I hurt," he said in that weak voice. "But I could eat. Any grub left?"

"I'll get you some tomatoes, Webb," Jake said, rising quickly. Then he hesitated and looked at Kirby, then at the gold. Kirby grinned at him, and a vague expression rippled across Jake's face as if in answer. Finally he went out.

Kirby went back to checking the pokes. He counted them again. Then he opened each one and closed it again, drawing the leather thongs tight. He juggled them in his hand, estimating their weight, his mouth tight.

Martin watched him. He couldn't get over the fact that old Ben had kept all this gold hidden. Jake came in with a bowl, and fed chunks of tomatoes into Webb's mouth. Every so often he stole a glance at Kirby, who sat hunched over the gold like a hen over her eggs. No one spoke. Martin looked at dust motes floating in the beam of strong sunlight that came through the window. His teeth ached where Kirby had hit him. He thought vaguely that it must be well along in the afternoon, and he wondered if he would have a chance to get hold of Webb's gun.

Jake finished feeding Webb and took the bowl back to the other room. He came back in quickly. "A rider coming," he said in a low voice. "Off that way—"

A gun appeared in Kirby's hand. He went at a crouch to the side of the window and looked out at an angle. "Hell," he said after a moment, "it's a woman. Who the hell would she be, Daly?"

Martin felt his mouth tighten. "Probably Mrs. Johnson. She comes up to see Ben about once a week."

He could hear the hoof sound now. Kirby said softly, "Keep down. Maybe she'll go on by."

Martin knew she wouldn't go on by. She would stop and come in to see if old Ben was all right. He took a long breath,

gathered himself and dove toward the door. And he yelled, "Run, Betty! Run!"

He almost made it to the door, but not quite. He heard Jake curse, and then a weight hit him on the back of the head and slammed him into a dark pit. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Blood on the Moon!

MARTIN DALY had run a cattle ranch before coming to Arizona. That was in Colorado, where he'd gone when he was nineteen. It had taken him six years of herding another man's cattle before he burned his own brand on a hide, and it had taken another seven years of hard work and frugal living to put him in the clear.

So one day he left the ranch in charge of a capable foreman and traveled to San Francisco with the express purpose of finding a wife. He met Rita at a social, married her, and took her back to Colorado. But during the months that followed he realized he'd made a mistake. Rita hated ranch life. She complained, she bickered, she was constantly after him to sell out and move back to San Francisco. Martin did not take her discontent seriously at first, thinking she would get over it. She took to spending more time in the nearby town than was necessary, but it wasn't until he heard the rumors that she was seeing a known gambler that Martin put her in her place. Then he looked up the gambler and beat him to a bloody pulp.

Rita disappeared a month later, taking all of Martin's spare cash with her. In town he learned that she and the gambler had taken the same train to San Francisco. He followed them there and found them together in a hotel room. Rita was screaming when he shot the gambler, killing him with three bullets through the chest.

After the trial at which he was cleared, Martin returned to the ranch, but it wasn't any good. His wife's betrayal of him with another man affected him more deeply than he was aware. He became surly, easily offended. He had several fights with men who had been his friends. Before long, he was known as a man to be shunned.

For a while he fought the bitter loneliness, telling himself he needed no one, that he could stand alone. But finally he faced the fact that he was through in this country he had called home. It was about then that he started trying to forget his past with the aid of a bottle, nursing a blind and unreasonable hatred within himself.

Then one day he realized what he was doing, that a bottle wasn't helping one bit. He sold out and rode deep into the hills of Arizona, where he built a cabin of sorts. Liquor and indifference had taken most of his money, so he turned to prospecting for his simple needs. He became friendly with old Ben Sloan, somehow sensing a bond between them. Ben loved to talk of the day when he would strike it rich and live a life of luxury. But like Martin, he shunned strangers, and even disliked going into town for supplies. Once he told Martin that he'd come to Arizona after the war between the States, though he never spoke of the war itself. It was as if some deep horror of it still clung to the old man.

One day Martin met Betty Johnson at Ben's. She was a young widow, whose husband had been killed in a stampede the year before. She was tall and shapely, with dark hair and direct blue eyes that searched Martin's with a faintly puzzled look, as if she wondered what a healthy young man was doing in these sun-baked mountains on his lonesome.

He met her a half dozen times after that, mostly at Ben's, once or twice in the hills. She spoke of her life, her work, and she tried to draw him out as though she sensed his need and wanted to help. But it wasn't until their last meeting that she became out-spoken.

She had decided then that he was wasting his life, and she had told him so.

"I don't know what's back of it, Martin, but I think I know you well enough by now to realize that you're feeling damn sorry for yourself."

Martin had gotten angry. "Nobody asked you," he had said.

"That's true," she had answered. "But I'm still right, and you know it. You resent people, I think you even hate them. And instead of facing it, you're hiding from it. And one day you'll wake up to the fact that you've wasted your entire life, just the way old Ben has wasted his—"

Wasted.

HE WOKE up slowly. The word still echoed in his mind. Had he been dreaming? His head throbbed. What was wrong? Then he opened his eyes and instantly placed himself. He saw Betty's face above his, her eyes that held an expression between relief and anxiety. And he heard her saying, "How do you feel, Martin?"

"All right."

He sat up and found Jake and Kirby watching him, Kirby with a tight grin on his face. The sun was down, the light furtive in the room. Martin looked at the girl. "You know what happened?"

She nodded. "They told me." She turned her head. "And I told them that if I wasn't back to the ranch by sundown, some of my men would come looking for me."

"I heard you the first time," Kirby said dryly.

Jake cleared his throat. "We don't aim to hurt you, ma'am."

The girl didn't answer.

"What're we gonna do, Kirby?" Jake asked anxiously.

"I told you we need grub!" Kirby said. "Neither one of us knows this country worth a damn, and if we make a run for it we got to go fast and far, and we can't do it on empty bellies."

"What about Webb? He ain't fit to ride."

"Well, what about him?" Kirby said, annoyed. "They got to prove he helped us, don't they? And how they gonna do that. That guard—" He broke off.

"Yeah, I never thought," Jake breathed. "They can't do anything to Webb, can they, Kirby? Then we gonna run for it?"

"That's what I been telling you, ain't it? You could head for town any time now, and be back in a couple hours. Then we each take an extra horse, see? Change off and keep riding the rest of the night, then maybe hole up again in the morning." He added angrily, "Unless you'd rather sit here holding Webb's hand until they come for us."

Jake shook his head emphatically. I don't want to ever go back to Yuma." He looked at Kirby. "Why don't we both go into town?"

"Because, you damn fool, they'll be looking for two men, so one'll have a better chance of getting by with it. Anyhow, I'd better stay here and watch these two."

"We could tie them up."

"We'll tie them up all right," Kirby said. "Well, you make up your mind to go, or not?"

"I guess I could go all right," Jake said slowly. "What about the gold?"

"Hell, if you're gonna worry about that, take half of it with you."

"Half? We got to cut Webb in, don't we?"

"Sure, sure," Kirby grinned. "Then take your third, if you're gonna worry." He bent down and put six of the pokes to one side, then looked up at Jake. "Take 'em."

There was an uncomfortable silence. Jake looked down at the pokes, then scratched his beard, and gave a long sigh. "Hell, I don't figure you to run out on me," he said finally.

"Why the hell should I?" Kirby grinned. "We're in this together, ain't we?"

"Yeah," Jake said, but not as if he was sure. He hitched at his gunbelt, hesitated, then said, "Well, I guess I'd better get

going. I'll not be gone very long."

"Here's money," Kirby said, handing it to him. "But first you'd better help me tie these two. There's some rope over there."

They tied Martin and Betty securely, then stretched them along side each other on the bunk. Kirby followed Jake outside and watched him mount one of the horses. It was getting dark, and Kirby could just make out as he reined past the cabin and headed for the town trail.

Kirby grinned, watching him go. He'd wait a half hour, he thought. No longer. He might as well start getting things ready. He turned back to the cabin.

KIRBY had been a loner since he could remember. There had been two older brothers who had rode it over him when he was a boy, so Kirby had learned at an early age to take care of number one.

Their father had owned a prosperous stage-and-freighting business in Texas. He died when Kirby was seventeen. The older brothers became partners and left Kirby out in the cold. They told Kirby he was too young to share in the estate, and offered him a job as clerk in their office.

Kirby accepted the job, but he didn't forget. One night about a month later he robbed the safe of twenty thousand dollars that had been left there overnight by a rancher after closing a big cattle deal. Kirby was stuffing the money in his saddlebags when his older brother surprised him. His brother pulled a gun, but Kirby was faster. He killed his brother and half decided to go after his other brother. Then he realized that this second brother would have to cover the twenty thousand dollar loss, and that to him this would be worse than being killed, so Kirby let it go at that.

He crossed the border into Mexico where a black-eyed *señorita* and her slick accomplice soon separated Kirby from his cash. He lived by his gun in the years that followed, until he was caught trying to rob the Prescott bank singlehanded.

The judge gave Kirby twenty years, and he thought now that he would still be in the pen if it hadn't been for Jake. But Jake was stupid, and Kirby didn't need him any longer. This knowledge had been his long before he found the gold.

He'd already decided to take Kirby's horse as well as the girl's, for they were both good animals. He piled the pokes in the saddle-bags, cinched the straps, and rose. He glanced at Webb, who was asleep, his mouth open and his breathing hoarse. Kirby wondered absently if he was dying.

Daly and the girl were talking in low voices. There was something intimate and close in the softness of their speech that roused a sudden unexplained feeling in Kirby. He resisted it, but deep within him some forgotten voice returned, a softness, a memory blurred with time and his manner of living, but still there.

And anger rose within him then. "Shut up!" he shouted. "Damn it, shut up!" He moved threateningly toward the bunk. Then he collected himself. "Shut up talking," he said absently, and turned back to the window.

It was dark now, but there was a moon. Still it was time to go. The girl was probably right—her men would be out looking for her. Kirby picked up the heavy saddlebags and moved through the dark cabin to the door . . . .

JAKE was worried, and the more he worried the more confused he became. Now he was worried about Webb, and Kirby, and the gold, and he couldn't straighten any of it out.

He realized, though, that the girl had spoiled their chances of holing up in the cabin. And he guessed Kirby was right about the law not being able to touch Webb. Still, Kirby was Jake's biggest worry. He shouldn't have killed that guard, Jake thought, riding away from the cabin. That guard had been all right, and he'd trusted them, but he hadn't lived long enough tc

realize that he shouldn't have trusted Kirby.

Kirby had wanted to run out on Webb, too, right from the time the old man had shot him. Jake couldn't understand that, and it confused him. But he came to the slow conclusion that a man couldn't trust Kirby.

That brought him back to the gold. Suppose Kirby takes it into his head to run out while I'm gone? he thought. It didn't seem possible, but the thought persisted. He rode on, muttering to himself, thinking about Kirby and the gold.

"If it hadn't been for me he'd still be in the pen," he said out loud. Then he reined in. A little anger rose within him.

"By god, he ain't getting away with it," Jake said.

But he rode on a ways, still muttering to himself. The moon was bright and the sandy trail clear between the hulking boulders, the twisted barren junipers. The landscape was dull gold on which shadows crouched. Somewhere, a coyote howled at the moon.

"He sent me to town so's he could run off the gold," Jake muttered. "And me and Webb has each got a third coming. By god, he ain't about to get away with it."

Suddenly the startled thought came that Kirby had already gone, and without further thought Jake turned his horse and headed for the cabin at a gallop. But doubt rose in him again. It could be he was wrong about Kirby, and what would he say if he came galloping up to the cabin and Kirby was still there? He slowed to a trot, then a walk, and he slid down and tied his horse when he came in sight of the meadow.

There was no light in the cabin, but then he hadn't expected Kirby to light a lamp. Jake decided to have a look in the shed and see if all the horses were still there. If they were, he would ride to town.

Jake palmed his gun, though. Then he circled wide of the cabin and around the shed till he could look inside. It was dark in there, and the horses snuffed when he came in to count them. They were all there. A great relief welled up in Jake, followed by embarrassment because he had doubted Kirby. He hurried out of the shed, walking fast on his toes to get away from the cabin. And just then he heard the door slam.

He stopped stone still. In the light of the moon he saw Kirby cross to the shed. Kirby had something hanging across his shoulders. He disappeared into the shed, and Jake heard hoof sounds. He's doing just what I thought! Jake said to himself.

He had holstered his gun, but now he palmed it again and walked around the side of the shed. A horse was backed into the light there, and Kirby was strapping on the saddlebags. Jake said, "What the hell you doing, Kirby?"

Kirby jumped like a poker had jabbed him in the backside, and he reached for his gun at the same time, fired, and missed. Jake pulled trigger almost the same time, and he heard his bullet *whack* into the horse. The animal screamed and bucked, then slowly slid down to its haunches, still screaming. Jake saw Kirby run across the clearing to some rocks, and then saw him turn, and he dove behind the dead horse just in time. Kirby fired and missed again.

There was a short silence. Then Kirby called. "What the hell's the matter with you, Jake? I thought you were on your way to town?"

"You was aiming to run out on me with the gold," Jake called back.

Kirby laughed. "Man, you're crazy! I was just getting things ready for when you come back, so's we wouldn't waste any time. Then next thing I know you're standing back of me with a gun in your hand. Can't blame me for jumping and shooting, can you?"

Jake thought about it for a while. Then he said stubbornly, "You was fixing to run out on me."

"Oh, hell, don't be a damn fool! How

far would I get without grub? Hell, you could've been damn near to town by now."

Jake was feeling of the saddlebags. He didn't know whether to believe Kirby or not.

Kirby rose from behind the rocks. "Put up your gun, Jake," he said. "We wasted too much time already, and probably somebody heard the shots. We better get out of here fast."

"You got all the gold here," Jake said.

"Why the hell not, as long as we stick together?" Kirby took a couple of steps away from the rocks. Jake stared hard, but it looked as if Kirby had holstered his gun. He stood up slowly, still holding his own gun. Kirby stopped about ten yards away. "Put it up, Jake," he said. And then, as Jake moved his gun to his holster, he said, "That was a crazy thing to do, coming back like that."

"I thought you was gonna run off with the gold," Jake said, putting his gun in the holster. "Kirby—"

He almost realized his mistake too late. Kirby's arm was a blur, and the bullet caught Jake in the side but didn't knock him down. By that time he had his own gun out again. He fired and saw Kirby go down to one knee, then get up and run zig-zag for the rocks. Jake aimed carefully and squeezed the trigger, but he missed.

"Damn you!" he yelled. He sank down behind the horse. The other horses in the shed were stamping and kicking. One had broken loose and bolted outside. Jake breathed heavily, feeling blood run down his side. "Damn you, Kirby!" he yelled again, but his voice was weaker than it had been.

There was no answer from Kirby.

MARTIN had just finished telling Betty about himself when they heard the first shots. He wasn't at all sure how it had come about, but lying close together like that he had forgotten where they were and had found himself telling her about Rita, and why he had left Colorado.

"I can understand how it must have been for you," she said, "but, you know, Martin, that we can't hide forever from tragedy." She hesitated. "When Bob was killed—I wanted to stop living. The ranch somehow didn't mean anything any longer."

"You got over it."

"I'll never get over it completely, but one has to live. And living the way Ben did—and the way you've been doing—is not good."

They were lying facing each other, and he said, "Kirby just went out. Listen, let's both turn around. Maybe you can untie my wrists—"

Just then they heard the shots.

"Some of my riders," Betty said in an excited voice. "Or a posse—"

"Listen—" Martin said.

They heard Kirby yelling at Jake, asking him what the hell was the matter, and then Jake's answer.

"Get going on those knots," Martin said urgently.

He felt her hard slender fingers at his wrists. Then his hands were free and he was sitting up, untying his ankles. He freed Betty and stepped across to Webb's bunk for the gun. It was still there. In the darkness he heard Webb saying weakly, "What's—going on?"

Martin did not answer. Two shells. He pushed them into the cylinder and made sure one was beneath the hammer. "Stay here," he told Betty.

He felt her near him, and then her hand on his face. "Be careful," she said softly.

They heard two more shots, close together, then another shot.

"They're out by the shed," Martin said.

He went out the front door, wondering if either man had wounded the other. He went wide of the house and then cut left until the back of the shed faced him. The shed and the cabin made long shadows in the moonlight. He remembered a horse

screaming as he walked at a crouch around the side of the shed. Jake had come back. He hadn't trusted Kirby, who had been going to run off with Ben's gold. Martin stopped, hearing a faint distant moaning sound.

He bellied down to the ground then, and peered cautiously past the corner, seeing first the bulky shadow of the down horse, and behind it the crouched figure of Jake. He knew it was Jake by its size, and from the way he was moaning that he was hard hit.

He wondered where Kirby was holed up, and then figured since Jake was behind the horse here, Kirby could well be in those rocks over yonder.

Just then Kirby spoke from the rocks. "Let's stop being damn fools, Jake. We're neither one of us doing any good here." There was a pause. "Jake! Can you hear me, Jake?"

"Come on out, damn you," Jake said, and fired towards the rocks. "Come out, I tell you!"

Then there was silence. There was a little sandy mound of earth not far from Martin, and he knew it covered old Ben. Damned funny, he thought. All that gold hid away. Gold had been Ben's reason for coming here—or had it? The way it looked now it had been just an excuse that maybe he'd got to believing himself. I guess he didn't really want to leave here and go back into the outside world, Martin thought. Something must have happened to him in the war to make him like that, and all his talk about striking it rich and moving to the city was just an act. The realization came as a shock.

He felt somehow free, as if shackles that had bound him were gone, as if barriers within him had been raised. And he realized that this was so because he had told Betty about himself and his past. Maybe it was something he should have done a long time ago. Suppose he had never told it, had always kept it bottled up inside, would he then have ended up like Ben, a surly old man afraid to face his future, unable to see it at all because of the memory of his past? And he realized then it could happen to him.

He heard Jake mutter, then the faint sliding sound as he moved. He was crawling out from behind the horse. Martin raised his gun, then lowered it. He watched Jake crawling slowly and laboriously across the clearing toward the rocks. Jake was half way across the clearing when Kirby fired. Martin heard the bullet *whack* into Jake, then saw Jake crawling forward again.

"You crazy damn fool!" Kirby shouted. He fired again, but must have missed, for Jake continued to crawl toward the rocks. "Damn you, Jake!" It was almost a question, and there was a more than little awe in it.

Martin raised up slowly. He saw Kirby's figure rise at the same time, and then the quick flash as he fired again, then again. He heard Kirby curse, saw him fumble at his belt to reload his gun. But he was having trouble.

Martin stepped forward. "Reach, Kirby!"

Kirby did not seem to hear him. He had stopped fumbling at his belt and was staring at Jake, who was slowly and steadily wavering to his feet, moving toward Kirby.

Kirby backed away, limping, fingers fumbling shells into his gun. Jake came on. Kirby screamed in pure panic, raised his gun and fired full into the big body just as Jake pulled the trigger. Jake lurched forward the last few steps that separated them, then stumbled and collapsed on top of Kirby.

Martin walked over to them and looked down, relieved at the thought that he'd been spared a killing. He heard Betty call, and saw her coming from the back door, and he tossed his gun away and went to meet her. ★ ★ ★

Neal Archer could beat his brother Frank all hollow with fists, or guns, or anything else, until a dark-eyed, flame-hearted dance-hall queen evened the odds!

by Will Cook

THE stage road connecting Wineglass to the rail's end a hundred and fifty miles to the northeast was a rutted, torturous slash through the raggedness of the land. The flatness of the Indian Nations was upswept into rolling hills with a monotony broken only by an isolated ranch house, or a few shaggy cattle bunched against a hillside. The swaying of the coach was an unceasing thing; then abruptly it ended. Below them, in a flat, sheltered valley, lay Wineglass: a sprawled jumble of unpainted buildings, with a plaza fetlock deep in dust.

The team lurched against their collars when the driver shouted at them; then the rocking Concord plunged off the slope, marking its passage in furious banners of dust. Then minutes later they crossed the covered bridge north of town, rattled the length of Custer Street, and skidded to a halt before Murphy's Hotel.

A heavy-shouldered cattleman kicked the door open, stepped down stiffly, and

Deadlier Than The Male

Angeleta appraised Neal as if he were a specimen in a bottle of alcohol: "I didn't cry when you left. . . ."

gave the driver a withering glance before mounting the hotel veranda. He paused, his legs spread wide against the faulty equilibrium produced by the long coach ride, and, as a man across the street called to him, "Archer! Neal Archer!", he turned, his face heavy with annoyance. The annoyance vanished, to be replaced instantly by cautiousness. He set his valise down and crossed the street at an unhurried walk. The man detached himself from the wall of the saloon, stepping down into the plaza dust, his face a mixture of pleasant surprise and apprehension.

Archer studied him for a moment, his eyes lingering longest on the badge. He said, "Frank, I never thought I'd see the day when you'd be caught dead with one of those things on."

The severity of Frank Burk's face broke,

as if he had passed a dangerous obstacle and survived it. He smiled and took Archer's arm. "Come in and have a drink."

The heavy man pursed his lips and consulted his watch. "Pretty close to supper time, Frank. Maybe later." Neal Archer's face was full and boldly chiseled, tight as if he were holding himself in check.

Burk read this and urged him again. "Come on, Neal. Just one and some talk."

"We're talked out," Archer said bluntly.

"No need to be sore," the marshal murmured. "Maybe we ought to let bygones alone, huh?"

The big man agreed, somewhat reluctantly, and stepped into the saloon behind Frank Burk. Garfinkle's was large and elaborate with a curtained stage running across the south end. Chairs were upended at this hour, and the bartender was idle as Frank and Archer bellied up. They took their drinks, then Frank pushed his glass back and clasped his hands, relaxing against the bar. He was an open-faced man, a shade over thirty and crow's feet sprouted at the edge of his eyes. "I ain't seen you for five years," Burk said. "I've wondered about you from time to time." Archer said nothing, studying his drink. The marshal added, " 'Scuse me for saying so, but danged if you don't look curried."

Archer flushed and said, somewhat stiffly, "I got married awhile back. I put damn foolishness behind me."

"Th' hell!" Frank Burk was definitely shocked, then his eyes wrinkled again and he gave a soft laugh. "First I ever heard of a cat changin' his hide. What the devil you doin' over here anyway?"

"Cattle," Neal said. "I did pretty well after we went separate ways. I got a big place up in the Nations now. I heard from a fella riding through that old man Updegraph has a fine double-wintered herd he wants to get rid of. I'm in a position to take them off his hands."

"Well, now," Frank said. "That's too bad. He and his boys went over to Pima City day before yesterday. Won't be back for—let's see, today's Tuesday—Saturday at the latest."

Archer's mouth turned displeased, and he gave it a moment's thought before saying, "I hadn't planned to wait. Ella expects me back in a few days—well, I guess I can wait if I have to." He raised his head and motioned to the bartender and their glasses were refilled.

Frank Burk studied the heavy man for some time, then said, "Tell me about your wife, Neal. You're such a close-mouthed cuss."

"Nothing to tell," Archer said with his usual bluntness. "After you and I had that hassle in Abilene, I went north into the Nations. I hit a little luck at Faro and another on a property investment. I met Ella about a year ago, and we finally got married."

THE marshal traced his finger through the damp rings left by their glasses and murmured, "You're a funny one, Neal. When a man thinks he knows you best he finds out he don't know you at all. I never believed you'd settle down, just like I never believed you'd run out on Angeleta—but you did."

Neal's head came around quickly, and he slapped the bar with his palm. "I don't want to talk about her, do you understand?"

The marshal straightened at the sudden heat in Archer's voice. "I guess I don't understand, but if you don't want to talk about her, then we won't—but she's here in town. Came in six months ago from San Antone."

Archer's face bleached until the skin stretched tight and translucent over the bones. His eyes, always dark, now glowed with some inner fire. His voice was clipped. "You were always the joker, but this is a damn poor one, I can tell you."

Frank shrugged his shoulder, and a small smile played at the corners of his mouth. "No joke, Neal. She's here and

she sings and kicks up her legs for the crowd here at Garfinkle's every night."

The big man turned his face away, half-hiding it from the marshal. A muscle worked along the edge of his jaw. He said, "That's an unseemly thing for her to be doing."

"What did you expect her to do?" Burk said gently. "She came down a damn long ways after you pulled out."

The talk prodded Archer's temper, and he swung toward the marshal. "If you're trying to blame me, then say your say and get it over with. I don't have to take your insinuations and smug remarks."

"I got nothin' to say," Burk stated. "But you ought to see her. Maybe you owe her that much."

"Now we're getting somewhere," Archer said softly. "You're still hanging around waiting for her to smile at you."

Burk shrugged, not at all angry. "There's something about a pretty girl that catches a man's eye. I keep rememberin'—" He let it trail off and added, "Don't forget that you're married, huh?"

Archer struck out with the back of his hand; the marshal staggered back against the bar, an angry mark against his cheek. "I'm not carryin' a gun," he murmured and watched the wild flame fade from Archer's eyes. There would be no more talk for them now, both understood that, and Burk turned on his heel and walked out of the saloon.

The bartender watched this flurry with interest and calmly collected the bottle and glasses after Burk left. He eyed Archer knowingly and said, "You and him is friends, ain'tcha?"

"You think so?"

"I don't know you, mister," the bartender said, "but I do know Frank Burk. If you wasn't a damn good friend, you wouldn't have got away with that slap."

"Tough, huh?"

"Tough enough to tame this town and make her nice and gentle. You want to watch yourself, friend. Burk might curry you proper."

Neal Archer snorted and spun a dollar on the bar. "I've known Frank all of my life. There never was the time when I couldn't beat him at fists, guns, or what the hell." It was proud talk, and he regretted it even as he spoke. He shoved himself away from the bar and walked out and across the street, retrieving his bag from the hotel veranda. He registered and took the key, trudging up the stairs and down a cross hall to a musty room facing Custer Street.

He deposited his bag on the bed, changed his shirt and tie, and went down the street in search of a meal. He found a small restaurant on a back street and took a corner table, ordering when a tired-looking waitress came up to him. Outside, the sun was half-settled for the night, the last faint rays flooding the land. A few customers entered, gave him a curious glance, then fell to eating. Down the street, a dog barked happily, and children's voices rose and fell away in long calls. It set a mood upon him, mellowing his thoughts, and he found contentment; it was a stranger to him, and he sat for a moment just savoring its goodness.

A FULL darkness was upon Custer Street when he went back to it, cruising its length on both sides before settling on the hotel veranda for his cigar. He found it to be a pleasant town; many men nodded to him in open friendliness. He saw no sign of the marshal, and it sent up a vague worry. He cursed himself, knowing even while doing so that he had not been able to help himself. His life was dotted with impulsive acts, often regrettable. Some stability told him to take the next stage out of town, then he remembered Frank's remark about a man and a pretty girl, and he smiled, knowing he would stay and see her again.

Buggies wheeled into town from the south and west. Riders pounded down the

length of the street sending up palls of dust. Wineglass filled slowly, not crowding itself, but with an easy fullness that spelled peace and a general prosperity. Across Custer Street, Garfinkle's door was open to the evening breeze, and the piano player struck a chord, then rippled into a lively number. Laughter floated out into the night, and Neal spun his cigar into the dust and rose, crossing the street.

He found a vacant table near the stage, half hidden by the draperies, and invested in a large schooner of beer. He sat for a half hour, idly listening to the murmuring voices around him, coming alert when Frank Burk came in. Neal caught his eye and motioned for him; Burk nodded and came on, but there was nothing in the man's face, no friendliness nor anger, just a flat neutrality.

Archer examined the tips of his fingers and said, "I'm sorry as hell about that smack in the chops. I shouldn't be so touchy."

The words lacked grace, but Burk knew it was the best Archer could do and accepted it with a nod. "Let's face it," he said. "You got plenty to be touchy about."

Archer's eyes clouded, and he snapped, "If you want blood, use a knife!"

Burk's face was of that common variety that is difficult to read. The eyes were blue, in sharp contrast to his black hair, and there was no prominence of jaw or cheekbones to give a man a clue to his temper. He shot Archer a half-smile and murmured, "Every man has a conscience, Neal. It's just that sometimes you have to dig a little to find it."

There was an easiness about the man that Archer envied—the way the tall lawman could relax and command attention without an outward effort. Burk asked, 'Tell me about Ella."

"That's twice you asked the same question," Archer said. "You don't give up easy."

"Sometimes it takes two or three tries to get the facts out of you," Burk said flatly, but without malice.

Archer's brows came together in a displeased frown, and he murmured, "I could get sore as hell at you sometimes, and you know it too."

"A free country," the tall man stated. He grinned at the expression on Neal's face and prodded again, "What's she like—you never said."

Archer displayed a great reluctance, pawing his mouth out of shape and letting his eyes wander over the room. Finally he said, "She's young, maybe too young, but a man can't tell about a woman until after he's married her, and then it's too late to do anything about it." He gave a short laugh and murmured, "The little snip's got a temper and a will of her own. Some time when I gamble a little too much or take one too many she rags me half to death, but I guess a man's just got to shut up and take it as a part of being married."

"Reminds me," Burk said after a short lull, "of a fella that just got married. Now he wanted a perfect wife just like you do and he was curious as to how that was brought about. Well, he knew this old duffer that had been married for thirty years, and his wife had never been known to yap at him at all, so he caught him on the street and asked him how he done it.

" 'Well,' says this old fella. 'Th' day me'n' my ol' lady hitched up wuz when it happened. I wuz drivin' her home in the buggy and the blasted horse balked in the middle of the road, so I sez, That's once. Goin' on a little ways, that stoopid critter sat down on me again, 'n' I sez, That's twice. I was danged near my place when that fool horse lay down in the middle of the road, lazy as a pet coon 'n I jerked out my pistol and shot him then and there.

" 'Why,' this fella said, 'my ol' lady was so hoppin' mad that she read me up one side 'n down th' other 'n I waited until she got through 'n' sez, that's once.' "

NO SMILE wrinkled Archer's heavy face. He lifted his beer, drank long and set the schooner down. "You ain't changed a bit, Frank. Still sittin' in the sun and tellin' stories."

"That's livin'," Frank Burk said seriously.

Archer blew through his nose like a bull elk. "Livin', hell—I live! I told you how you'd end up, in some hogwaller working for a few measly dollars. You have to have ambition, like I have."

"Sure," the marshal agreed. "You got ambition, but you ain't buildin'. You ain't even livin'."

The heavy man stiffened in his chair and his temper was exposed around the edges, a ragged thing. "Why damn you—I ought to make you eat that!"

"A big job," Frank said mildly. "I ain't got much muscle, like you have, but I growed some in other ways. It might not be the push-over it was five years ago." In the orchestra pit the musicians noisily strummed chords. Burk leaned forward on his elbows and grew gravely serious, "Walk out of here, Neal. You know what's good for you and what ain't. Why wave a red flag in front of your own face."

"You run your life," Archer reminded him. "I'll run mine. We had some difference of opinion about this before, remember?"

"You're like a little kid that gets the belly ache every time he eats sugar hards," Frank said, "but you can't leave 'em alone. Some men outgrow sugar hards, but the cravin' remains, and they turn to wimmen."

The heavy man spread his hands flat on the table and his voice was low and brittle. "I can outdraw you and outfight you. I don't know why I take such talk from you." He broke off his speech as the bouncers cruised along the walls, dimming the house lights, then the band launched into a number and the draperies parted across the stage.

Archer held his breath when she came to the center of the stage. Time hadn't changed her; nothing was changed about her, and his thoughts were bold across his face. Frank studied him with that half-smile, not once taking his eyes from Archer during Angeleta's performance.

She wore a low-cut dress that accented her high breasts and ended high on her thighs. Dark, mesh stockings gave her long, shapely legs a magic that, bare, they would have never possessed. Her skin was an ivory white, and loosely fallen hair made a waving black cascade over her bare shoulders. She sang a song of home and mother and love, but the words were lost to Archer. He sat, captured in memory, some pleasant, others unpleasant. The number ended with a wild cat-calling and applause, and the house lights flared up again.

Angeleta took her bows, smiling, waving, then she saw Archer. Her lips still curved, but they pulled away from the even teeth. Her eyes lost their gayety, turned brittle; then a moment later she was at his elbow, in the wings, all trace of friendliness gone from her face.

Archer made no move to rise, and Frank Burk stood up, offering her his chair then toed another over for himself. Angeleta appraised Neal as if he were a specimen in a bottle of alcohol and said, "I won't lie to you and tell you that I didn't cry when you left—because I bawled my fool eyes out. You made a lot of promises, Neal, and you never kept any of them."

Archer flushed and said, "That's in the past. Why drag it all out?"

"Maybe it's in the past for you," Angeleta said. "But it's still pretty real to me."

"Pull in your claws," Frank advised softly. "Neal's a family man now. You're a little late."

"You keep out of this, Frank. You tried to play big brother to this moose before but it didn't work. Now let me alone, and I'll work this out my own way." She swung back to Archer and said softly, "I have a small cabin back of the saloon, just

across the alley. I want to talk to you in private."

Archer grew uncomfortable and he murmured lamely, "Well, now—I don't think it's quite proper. I'll just say hello and goodbye here, and let it go at that."

Angeleta's laugh was a raw, insulting thing. "Let's not hedge, playboy. Frank is one of those upright men who'd wash my mouth out with soap if I said the wrong thing. You'd better play along this time, Neal." She stood up then, and her manner told Archer that she would not be refused; he didn't know if he wanted to refuse her. He gave the marshal a glance, but the bland expression had returned, and he gleaned nothing. He sighed and she turned. He followed her through the back room and across the alley.

CHAPTER TWO

Fingers in the Bowl

IT WAS a cheap cabin at best. Once, in Archer's life he would have never given it a second thought, but his values had changed. She read this in his face and said, "This is the bottom, Neal. You ought to know because you leave all of your friends there."

"Just what do you want out of me?" He tried to say this with dignity, but he possessed very little of it and it came off badly.

She was genuinely in doubt. "I don't know. Maybe revenge for what I am—maybe I want you like it used to be."

"What you suggest is impossible!"

"Make it possible," she said. "You always had the big dreams. Where are they now—in the gutter along with mine?"

There was cruelty in Archer and he said, "With your kind of woman—I wouldn't know."

She slapped him before the echo died in the room. It carried enough power to make him take a backward step and left a hard print on the planes of his cheek. "I've wanted to do that for five years," she said. "Also this." She came against him suddenly, locking her arms around his neck, fastening her lips to his with a fiery abandon.

If he had any resistance toward her, it vanished during the kiss. His huge arms crushed her to him until she gasped, but his fervor failed to diminish even as he released her. Angeleta's voice was a flowing rapid of sound, the words tumbling out end to end. "Neal, Neal—I've missed you, wanted you again like this. Darling, my darling, why did you ever leave me? I could have given you so much more than anyone else."

"Things are different now," Archer said, sobered by her outburst.

"How different?"

"Well," he groped. "I'm a man of substance—I have responsibility. This whole thing is impossible, Angel. What was between us is no more, and I think we'd better not see each other again."

She slanted him an amused glance and crossed the room to sit down, her long half-bare legs holding his eyes. "Neal," she said sweetly. "I want you to get rid of her—your wife."

It shocked him, but not as much as he pretended. He lighted a cigar with fingers that were not quite steady and murmured, "I can't believe you mean that. It would be heartless."

"I mean it," she said firmly. "You taught me how to be heartless."

His face grew hard and clever, and he reached a hand to an inner coat-pocket, withdrawing his wallet. "What you want is money." He said this as if he had uncovered a great truth.

"Money always helps," she said, matching his unconcern.

He hesitated, realizing he was playing a poor hand badly, then counted out two hundred dollars in banknotes and tossed them on her dresser. She gave them a

glance, no more, and said, "A partial payment?"

"In full," Neal told her. "Now leave me alone."

She rose from the chair with such fluid motion that his pulse quickened. She took his lapels and pulled his face close to her own. Her voice was husky, whether anger or passion he didn't know. "How can I leave you alone when you taught me to love you? Do you really think that what we once had is dead, or ever will die? You'll come back, Neal, because you're my kind of man—and I'm your kind of woman."

He took her hands away because he no longer trusted himself and said, "We're through, Angeleta. We were through five years ago. Don't make trouble now for either of us."

She smiled at him, that infuriating half-smile that lifted the ends of her full mouth. He turned away from her and let himself out and walked the length of the dark alley until he came to a cross street.

He had a beer and another cigar before going across the street to his hotel. Frank Burk was nowhere in sight, and Archer wondered about it, then shrugged it off, and mounted the stairs, letting himself in and lighting the lamp. He took off his coat and money belt, depositing the latter beneath his pillow. He removed his revolver from the spring holster under his left arm and laid it on the chair by the head of his bed, along with his watch and chain.

IT WAS a warm night, and his mind was filled with a thousand thoughts, but, strangely, he felt no worry. His wife, Ella, was seventy miles away, and he would be leaving in a day or two. He hated to admit it, but he agreed with Frank; there was something about a pretty girl that caught a man's eye.

There was some noise in the street below, but he turned a deaf ear to it and dozed. A fine, cooling breeze came through the window, and he woke, consulting his watch, noticing that it was after midnight.

Archer came out of a deep sleep with the sudden realization that he was not alone in the room. He reached for his gun as Frank Burk wiped a match alight and said softly, "Don't get proddy, Neal."

The sudden flare of the lamp half-blinded him, and he cursed and swung his bare feet to the floor. Frank raked a chair next to the bed and sat down. Neal said, "What the hell do you want, coming here in the middle of the night?"

"Thought you'd get lonesome for talk," the marshal said.

"You go to hell," Archer told him. "I ought to clout you one."

"Uh, uh," Frank murmured. "I told you once that I'd taken the last licking I was gonna take from you. We ain't kids no more—try to remember it." He dug his fingers into his shirt pocket and tossed the banknotes on the rumpled bed. "She don't want it," Burk said flatly.

Archer's face filled with blood and he said tightly, "You her keeper too? She's a big girl. Let her make up her own mind."

"People are like kids," Frank reminded him. "Sometimes they dip their fingers in the sugar bowl and don't know when to quit."

"—And you do, is that it?"

"Maybe this time I do, Neal. I think you'd better leave town."

"Is that official?" Neal's voice took on an edge.

"No," Frank said gently. "It was a suggestion, one I thought you'd understand, but I can make it official if I have to."

"Don't try it," Archer warned.

"I like to do things the peaceful way," Frank said. "You ought to know that."

"I don't like to be led around by the nose," Archer said. "I didn't like it when we were kids—I like it less now. You're no good for me, Frank. That's why I left

five years ago. You just hold a man down with them whining ways you got."

The marshal moved with a startling suddenness, sweeping up Archer's gun and throwing it out the window. The big man was momentarily startled and tried to rise; Burk drove him flat on the bed with an out-lashing fist.

Blood made a bright smear on Archer's mouth, but he made no move, just lay and stared at the marshal. Frank said, "Money buys everything, doesn't it? Well, it don't buy much around here. She didn't want to part with the money, but I made her give it to me. Get out now and buy your cattle elsewhere."

"I think I can lick you after all," Neal said and rose. Frank backed away, not out of fear, but to make room. There was thirty pounds difference in their weight with Archer touching two hundred, but Frank's slat-leanness was solid muscle, and, if there was fear in the man, it didn't show on his face.

Neal hitched up his long underwear and murmured, "How's this gonna be?"

"Just the way it always was," Frank said. "You fight anyway you please, and I'll try not to get my eyes gouged out."

Archer scowled and closed the distance, lashing out with a meaty fist. Frank let it slide over his shoulder and straightened the big man with a short uppercut that started the blood running in Neal's nose. Neal backed away and said, "Dammit, that hurt," and placed a finger alongside of his nose and blew to clear the passage. He adjusted his shoulders with a circular shrug and shuffled close to the waiting marshal. Frank took a glancing blow on the cheek to open Neal's eyelid, and, when the big man danced away to avoid the flailing fists, Burk followed him and leveled him with a clouting right.

Archer rolled and scrambled to his feet, a faint disbelief on his face. "You're learning, kid," he said, then rapidly covered himself, Frank's bouncing blows driving him back against the wall. Archer fought with a fury then, splitting Burk's lips and bringing him to his knees once, but the lawman rolled away before Neal could follow through.

Archer followed Burk against the wall, but the marshal ducked the killing punch and laced two into the big man's stomach. Archer gave ground, fighting to catch his wind, and Frank Burk sledged him flat.

ARCHER rolled over on his back and held up a hand, signifying that he had enough. "That's enough," he gasped. "You're markin' up my face, you bangtail coyote!"

"Too bad," Frank said without sympathy. "Get up or I'll finish it with you on the floor."

The big man realized then that he was in trouble and rolled to his hands and knees. Burk's feet were within easy grasp, and he reached out a long arm, hooking them suddenly. The marshal landed flat on his back with enough force to bring the water pitcher off of the commode.

Archer lurched to his feet for the kill, but he miscalculated his dizziness and fell, giving the marshal a chance to gain his feet. Burk met Archer as the big man bored in and pounded him flat three times before he stayed down.

There was a commotion in the hall, and Frank threw the door open to find the night clerk and three customers waiting with a dogged patience. Frank collared the clerk and said, "Get me some water and a couple of clean bar towels." He gave another man a push and ordered, "Go on now—this is none of your business."

He went back into the room and turned up the lamp, righting a chair and kicking clothes into a pile that had been scattered during the scuffle. The clerk came back with two fire buckets, and Frank Burk emptied one in Neal Archer's face. The man sat up and groaned and took the towel the marshal offered. He staggered to the

dresser and groaned again when he saw his puffed and discolored face.

Frank dipped a towel into the other bucket and washed his face. He tossed the damp cloth to Archer and said, "Still think I can't put you on that stage?"

Archer faced him, and there was no humor or pleasantness in his face. "I don't like to take a licking."

"Then stay out of fights," the marshal advised. Archer tried to hold his eyes, but he wasn't up to it, and Burk turned and went out and down the stairs.

The town lay silent and sleeping at this hour; Garfinkle's house men were turning out the last of the wall lamps. The marshal waited until darkness settled over the street, then cut across it, angling toward the narrow gap between Garfinkle's and the Drug Store. He emerged in the alley, glanced up and down its black length, then rapped on Angeleta's door.

She was a long time answering, then her voice was muffled and half-fearful from the other side. "Who is it?"

"Frank," the marshal said. "Let me in."

"Go away," Angeleta said. "I don't want to see you."

"I can kick this door right off the hinges," Burk said, "but I thought you'd like to save yourself some trouble." A long, drawn-out silence followed, then the door swung wide, and she was silhouetted against the lamplight. Frank Burt stepped into the room, sweeping off his hat. She pulled the dressing gown tighter about her and eyed him with a naked hostility.

"What is it this time?" she asked. "Another slap across the mouth?"

"Why not?" he asked. "Don't you have one coming?"

"Why don't you mind your own business?"

"Neal is my business—you know that. When you sink your claws into him, then *you* become my business."

"Don't hand me that," Angeleta said. "You've been putting nipples on his beer bottles for years. He got along without you for five years, and, comparing the two of you together again, I'd say he was a lot better off."

FRANK BURK'S eyes clouded with his thoughts, and his lips pulled flat. "I mean it—leave him alone." He changed tack then, and his voice held some measure of defeat. "What will it get you? He's married and beyond you now."

"No man is beyond me if I want him!" Angeleta said.

"You don't really want him," Burk stated. "You just want to drag him down, then laugh at him."

Her eyes took on fury, and she aimed the palm of her hand at Burk's cheek, but he moved faster, catching her wrist and imprisoning it in a tight grip. She struggled for a moment, then calmed herself. "He dragged me through the mud," she wailed. "I want to see him sweat for that."

The marshal shook his head. "No one dragged you down. The weakness was in you, and it's always been there—just like it's in Neal and every other man, but most don't ever let it out. If it hadn't been Neal, then it would have been some other man. You're like a flame to a moth—they just can't stay away from you."

"You got it all figured out, haven't you?" Angeleta's voice was filled with scorn. "All right, God—tell me this. What do you get out of playing wet nurse again?"

"I don't know," Burk admitted. "I never stopped to figure it out." He released her wrist, shoving her away from him.

Angeleta laughed and said softly, "Maybe it's me, is it, Frank?" He said nothing, just clamped his lips together, and this small betrayal of his feelings provoked another laugh. "You curse me, Frank, but it's all a lie, and you know it. Your eyes light up when you look at me. You're like a moonstruck schoolboy in love with the girl sitting in the desk ahead of you. You sop her pigtails in ink and slap her face

with them because you're in love and scared to death someone will find it out. You hate to admit it even to yourself."

"Are you through?" Frank said tightly.

She smiled and took a hip swinging step toward him, touching him lightly along the arms. The warmth of her hands went through his thin flannel shirt; her sweetness was a rising ambrosia, swaying him. "What about it, Frank? Have you ever dreamed of how I'd feel in your arms? What my lips would be like on yours?" She swayed against him and buried her fingers in his thick hair, pulling his mouth down to hers. There was wickedness in the kiss, and sweetness and love and a wild passion because these things were a part of her, but he forgot all of that, clinging only to this moment. It held everything for him, and held nothing.

He was the first to pull away, appalled by his reaction, and it gave him a shocked will. Frank murmured, "You're a thoroughly wicked woman," and went out, closing the door softly behind him.

He traveled the length of the alley, turning when he came to the cross street and halted when he saw the solitary light in the telegrapher's window. Frank rapped on the glass, bringing the man out of a half-sleep with a snap.

The window slid open and Frank said, "I want to send a wire." The operator shrugged and shoved a blank toward the marshal, and Frank wrote on it, then shoved it back. The telegrapher read it, raised his head quickly and said, "Men have been shot for less. You think it's wise?"

"I'll ponder the wisdom of it after you send it," Frank murmured. "No need to tell you to keep your mouth shut, is there?"

"No, indeed," the man said and rattled off the message, then waited until the acknowledgement and all clear came through with a wild clatter. Frank slid a silver dollar across the sill and took his change before turning to walk up town to his small room in the rear of the jail. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

That Kind of Woman

FRANK BURK idled on the hotel gallery, consulting his watch at frequent intervals. Inside, the clerk snapped the lock on the strongbox, already made up for the run south. The exchange driver and shotgun guard came out of the restaurant across the street and settled themselves on the porch.

On Garfinkle's wide veranda, Neal Archer paused to give the street a sweeping glance, letting his eyes linger longest on the lounging marshal. Burk traded glances with the man, and Archer turned and re-entered the saloon.

High on the land north of the town, the stage paused before teetering over the rim and starting its downward flight in a banner of looping turns. Burk caught sight of it as it rattled through patches of open land; following its course by the flag of dust that boiled up and out behind it. Twenty minutes later it stormed across the covered bridge north of town and thundered the length of Custer Street.

The Wells Fargo agent came out with the strongbox; the relief driver and shotgun guard shouted greetings when the stage slid to a halt amid the creak of leather springs and protesting brake blocks. The door was flung open, and a drummer dismounted, shaky and pale, and hurried across the street to Garfinkle's. Burk moved away from the wall when the young woman thrust her head out; he gave her his arm to dismount, and she thanked him with a brief smile.

The lathered team were unharnessed; a fresh team backed into place. Neal Archer had come to stand in the saloon doorway, his eyes furiously riveted on the marshal and the woman on his arm. She turned her head, raising her hand in greeting and, when he spun savagely and disappeared into the saloon, dropped it, and a sadness

crept across her face. She looked away.

Burk's face mirrored his disapproval, and he said, "I guess he's a little surprised. Then again, he ain't been feelin' too good the last two or three days." He saw the words run off of her mind and murmured, "I better show you to your room," and led her into the hotel. He guided her up the long stairs and opened the door for her. She paused in the doorway for a moment, giving him a searching glance, and he entered the room, sweeping off his hat and toeing the door closed behind him.

He studied her as she removed her hat and gloves. She was a tall girl with wheat-colored hair and the palest eyes he had ever seen. Her mouth was long beneath a straight nose, and her eyebrows lay in a slightly arched line across the base of her forehead. She had, he decided, a wistful face, but for all of her youth he sensed the will beneath her wistfulness. There was a fire, a strong pride in her eyes. It pleased him, and he felt relief that she was not a weak woman as he had feared. Burk said, "It was kind of you to come, ma'am."

She swung around until she faced him and murmured, "But not wise."

The marshal lowered his eyes and twirled his hat idly in his hands. "No," he said. "It wasn't, but then, I'm not a very wise man." When he raised his eyes to her, her composure shattered like a crystal dish, and she turned away, showing him her shaking shoulders. There was no sound to her crying, for she was too proud to permit this show of her weakness. He said lamely, "Sometimes the best man there is can be the dangdest fool."

Ella controlled herself with an effort and sat down on the edge of the bed, daubing at her eyes with the corner of her handkerchief. Her voice was soft, but it held no hint of defeat or despair, her mouth remaining firm and determined. "I feel that I know you, Frank, because Neal has spoken of you so often. When I got your wire, I was confused—and a little afraid. Please understand that I know Neal is not perfect. I knew that before we were married, but he has been a good husband. Your message was so—so cryptic, I sensed an alarm. Will you tell me what's happened?"

The marshal studied the worn pattern of the rug, his lips pulled flat with his thoughts, and a fine flame danced in the depths of his eyes. He said, "Some things a man ought to explain for himself. I'll go over and tell him you're here."

"He knows I'm here," Ella stated. "Let him come here to me. His pride will bend that much without snapping." She saw the sudden flare of approval in Burk's eyes and asked suddenly, "Just what is the relationship between you and Neal. You're very close despite your differences."

THE question took him by surprise, but he covered it quickly and murmured, "Let's just say that once we had somethin' in common, and let it go at that."

He stopped talking when the heavy knock sounded on the door and opened it, standing aside as Neal came into the room.

Neal Archer looked from one to the other and said, "Ha!"

"The outraged husband appears," Frank murmured. Neal's face was still discolored and a half-healed scar decorated his lower lip. He was flushed with displeasure, but he drew on some well of civility and kissed his wife on the cheek. Frank watched Ella's eyes, and they held no pleasure, no warmth. He turned to leave, and Neal's voice halted him, raw with a half-concealed anger.

"You just can't mind your own business, can you?"

Frank Burk shrugged his shoulders. "Call it a weakness of mine."

"No one asked you to send for her."

"It's all for you, Neal," the marshal told him. Archer laughed and said unbelievingly, "Sure—sure," and turned to Ella. Burk studied them for a moment, then let himself out quietly.

The room suddenly closed about Neal, and he felt uncomfortable. He crossed to the window and raised it, leaning on the sill to study the street below. Ella murmured, "You're not pleased at all because I've come here."

He waved a hand absently, and his voice was impatient, pushing her comment aside as ridiculous. "Of course I am—of course. It just seems a shame that you came all this way when I was leaving in the morning."

"Did you buy the cattle?"

"No," he said and didn't elaborate on it. He came and put his hands on her shoulders. "There are a few loose ends I have to wrap up, darling. When I come back we'll have supper together and a long talk."

She held his eyes with a will stronger than his own and said, "I'm your wife, Neal. I have a right to know what's going on."

His mood switched, and he became gentle. "Honey, please—I don't know what cock and bull story Frank fed you, but there's nothing wrong, believe me."

"Frank told me nothing," Ella stated. "He sent me a wire and said that you had been delayed and that it would be nice if I could join you here."

He clasped his hands behind him, and said in one berath. "All right, if you're going to be suspicious—I met an old friend, someone I knew before we met. It's nothing, really. We'll go home and forget it ever happened."

She raised one eyebrow. "Sometimes it is not that easy, Neal. Is it a woman?"

"Does it have to be a woman?" He snapped at her, not meaning to, and was instantly contrite.

"It *is* a woman," Ella said in a small voice.

"All right! It is a woman! Did you think I was a hermit before I married you? There are things like this that happen, that's all. It takes a little understanding." Her calm face brought his voice back down to a shout, and he slapped his hands together in a futile gesture. He added, "I'll send for some hot water, and you can freshen up a little. We'll have our meal here in the room. Be better that way." There was no argument in her, and he was glad of it. He opened the door and walked to the stairs to shout orders to the clerk.

The long shadows of evening crept into the room; he lighted the lamps to drive them back. Outside, the noise of the street filtered up, but he paid no attention to it. He rose several times and peered out the window at Garfinkle's. Each time Ella followed him with her eyes, but her face never changed, remaining composed and washed of emotion. The clerk came and bore the trays away; Neal lighted his after dinner cigar and tried to relax.

Ella sat with her hands folded, a full bodied girl with a strong call to life in the lines of her face. She said at last, "We're both just sitting here letting something fine go to pieces. We ought to do something about it, Neal—if you want to do anything about it."

He raised his head and regarded her soberly, "You think I want it to go to pieces?"

"I don't know anymore, Neal," she murmured. "There's many things I'm unsure of now."

"You don't love me," he accused.

It was her first display of temper, that quick tightening of her lips. She pushed it down until no hint of it showed in her face, and said, "That was a childish thing to say. Now is not the time to speak of love. If you have love for me, you'll end this now—this other woman."

"Will it right things with us?"

She gave him an honest answer. "I don't know."

He sat for a lengthy moment then snuffed out his cigar and rose, shrugging into his coat and stuffing his sixgun in the waist-

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band of his trousers. He bent over her to kiss her and, when she failed to raise her lips, touched her briefly on the forehead and went out.

The hallway was dark with only one lamp at the head of the stairs illuminating it. He looked around him and went down into the lobby and across the street.

Frank Burk waited until Neal disappeared down the stairs and inched himself along the hallway until he stood in half-shadows by Ella's door. The upper floor was quiet at this time of night, and only small sounds came up from the street below. He heard a board creak and Ella's small steps; a moment later the door opened, and she stepped out. The marshal took a step toward her and touched her on the arm. She gasped in quick fright, and he shook his head, pushing her back into the room. She made no protest but a large question was in her eyes. He waited until she took off her coat and hat, then sat down, finding that he had nothing to say.

ELLA half-understood him in that moment and murmured, "You see? I'm not as strong as I pretend to be. I was going to follow him because I'm not the kind of a woman to keep her hands folded long."

"Give the man a chance," Burk said and studied his big hands.

She stood quartered to the lamp, her high breasts and firm hips outlined blackly. He glanced at her, then pulled his eyes away. Ella asked, "How many chances does a woman have to give a man?"

Burk thought it over carefully, then said, "Some men—all their lives, I guess."

"It's not for me," Ella said quickly. "Back where we live, we don't have much of a community, but there are a few women. He has to dance with each of them and charm each in turn; twice now he's fought, he thinks he has to defend their good name." She gave a short snort of disgust. "Frank, I'm fed up with ..."

He rose and turned to leave, and she took his arm with surprising strength and spun him around until he faced her. That strong will was evident in her voice as she said, "I'm tired of being a dutiful wife, sitting here and waiting and not knowing what I'm waiting for. You don't seem the kind of a man who takes on another man's troubles. I asked you once and you evaded me—now I'll ask you again. What is Neal to you?"

"We're brothers," Burk said.

"Is his name Burk or Archer?"

"Archer," Frank said, then hastened to explain. "I'm the black sheep, not him." He read the expression in her eyes correctly and added, "You don't believe me?"

"I don't know what I believe anymore," Ella said and crossed to the window to gaze into the street. A long, quiet time passed, then heavy footfalls sounded in the hall and Neal Archer opened the door.

He halted, a deep scowl falling across his face and he said sourily, "It seems that every time I come into this room I find you here. You're becoming a regular boudoir bandit, Frank."

"Save the insults for later," Burk said and went to step past him. Archer uncoiled and drove him against the far wall with a wicked punch. Bright blood came to Burk's lip, and he shook his head to stop the swirling. He came to his feet, his pale eyes filled with anger, but it faded, and he said, "I guess I had that coming."

There was no expression on Ella's face as she watched this. Neal said, "I hit another man tonight because he couldn't keep his mouth shut. Now I'll tell you—leave me alone or I'll put a bullet in you!"

The marshal's face lost some of its tolerance. "All right, Neal. Now that it's all over, I'll get off of your back. That's what you always wanted, wasn't it?" He saw the uneasiness in Neal's eyes and, because he understood him so thoroughly, caught its full implication. His temper flared, and

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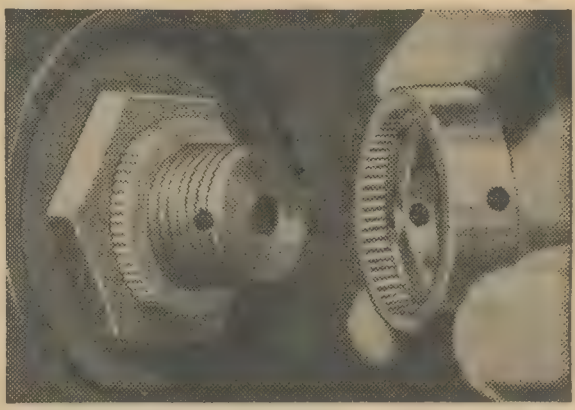

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he snapped, "You fool! For God's sake, man—where's your spine?"

Archer gave his wife a shamefaced glance and murmured, "Ella, I'm sorry. Someday you might understand." It was lame, and the best he could do. He wheeled and plunged from the room.

Frank Burk looked once at her, then pulled his eyes away to study the design on the peeling wall paper. Ella sat down on the edge of the bed, suddenly, as if her legs would no longer suport her weight. She asked in a small voice, "Is that the way these things end, in a hotel room with a bad taste in your mouth and a lot of emptiness inside you?"

"He's a damn fool," Burk stated. "But he'll be back. He'll fight and get conscience-stricken and come back. He always does."

"You think I'd want him then?" It was a half-angry question.

"Maybe you wouldn't want him," Burk said, "but you'd take him because you're that kind of woman. A strong woman can handle a weak man. My mother did it—you'll do it too."

Ella laughed, a brittle thing that was near to tears. "What kind of a woman am I—I honestly don't know. Am I weak, not able to hold what's mine, or a frightened one, not bold enough to cross a street and fight for what's mine?" She switched subjects abruptly, "What kind of woman is she, Frank?"

He shook his head. "I've been trying to find out for years, but I couldn't tell you. Maybe she's angel and some devil, with a little wantonness thrown in—but it's a nice combination. You can't tell what a woman is because she's so many things. I guess that's what pulls a man."

She had wisdom, and she said, "I *am* sorry, Frank. I didn't know that you wanted her too."

He had nothing more to say; she had summed it up for him. He turned to the door and paused, his hand on the knob. "Ella, remember that there's good and bad in every man. Neal can't help what he is no more than I can. Maybe it's because Neal loves life, and he's like a crazy bee jumpin' from flower to flower, overcome with the goodness of it all and a little afraid he'll miss something if he stays still. Maybe in the jumpin' he misses what's the best."

She waited until he had finished, never taking her eyes from his face. Her voice was quiet, but it carried that call to life within her, clear and strong. "After meeting you, and knowing you—I wish that you had come to the Nations instead of Neal." There was no embarrassment in her now; she had no pretense, offering him an honesty that was rare in man or woman. He understood her and why she had spoken, and he understood himself. It was this that turned him and made him close the door behind him.

He passed through the lobby and stood on the wide veranda, casually observing the traffic. It was a quiet town, Wineglass. He had made it so, and it pleased him, a man who found much in life to please him. He lighted a cigar, thinking of Ella and wrapping himself in those thoughts until the rude blare of a gun ruptured the night quiet.

CHAPTER FOUR

God's Own Fool!

A ROAR of voices erupted from Garfinkle's, and he threw the cigar into the dust and crossed Custer street at a run. He hit the doors with his shoulder, then he was in the room and the shouting men gathered near the foot of the stage. He plowed his way through the crowd and stopped on the inner edge of the circle.

The wounded man was on the floor, propped against the stage, and he cursed in a high, pain-filled voice. Angeleta stood in the wings, her eyes round and frightened with some awful knowledge in her face.

The wounded man pulled at the marshal's pant leg and said wildly, "By God, I want that fella arrested! He picked a fight with me once tonight, then another. By God, I'd have got him if my gun hadn't missed fire."

Frank saw that the man had only a flesh wound and lifted him into a chair. Somewhere in the rear of the saloon a door slammed, and Angeleta turned her head to follow the sound. Suspicion rocked the marshal and he said, "What was the fight about, mister?"

The man turned an angry finger on Angeleta and said, "Her, dammit! That filly's been makin' goo-goo eyes at me all night. Got me into one fight, but I figured it was worth it. Danged if I think so now."

Burk raised his head and said to two men he knew, "Take him over to the doc's and get that wing fixed. I got other business." He made the stage in one leap and pushed Angeleta into the half-dark wings.

"You little fool," Burk snapped. "What did you think you were doing?"

Her face sagged and large tears formed in her eyes. "I don't know, Frank. He came to me and told me he was going back to his wife—that he loved her. I didn't want to lose him—I didn't. No man really loved me, no man really loves any woman. My father left my ma, and no one has ever loved me. I wanted him just for myself, is that wrong? I just wanted to hold him so I flirted a little—and then he hit the man. I thought it was over, but it wasn't—so, so I told him the man said something." She was openly crying, and Frank Burk knew it was the first honest emotion she had felt for a long time. "I only wanted him to stay with me, Frank. I only wanted someone to love me. I didn't mean for him to shoot that man—honest I didn't."

The breath went out of Burk in a long sigh, and he turned toward the rear of the saloon. "Where are you going?" she said.

"To arrest the man," he said.

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There was no light in Angeleta's cabin, but he rapped on the door and called, "Better come out, Neal! You've gone too far now, and I don't want to have to come in and get you!"

A crowd began to form along the back wall of Garfinkle's. Burk's lips drew down disapprovingly when he saw Ella Archer push her way through the crowd jamming the door and halt. The marshal pounded again, calling, "Neal, listen to reason, man! Enough people have been hurt! Give it up now!"

"I got a gun in here, brother," Neal called through the door. "Don't make me use it on you."

The marshal backed off a step and rammed it with his shoulder. This time a shot bellowed from within and a long splinter of wood came off the outside of the door. Across the alley a man cried out and clutched his arm where the careening slug had torn through the muscle.

Burk's patience came to an abrupt halt, and he reached under his coat for his short-barreled Colt. Angeleta saw the light glint off the blued surface as he stood poised with it, his thumb hooked over the high hammer. She cried out and crossed the few feet separating them, grappling with him and crying, "No—no, Frank! Let him go, please let him go!"

He struck her, a shoving forearm blow that sent her reeling. He cocked the gun with a down-slinging motion and yelled, "Neal! Throw your gun down and submit to proper authority!"

The silence pulled at Frank, then Neal's muffled voice. "To hell with you, brother. I came into this damn town peaceful and I'm gonna leave under my own power. I never wanted all this, but I got it anyway. That door ain't locked, but you'd better not stick your nose through it unless you want to get it blowed off."

"You wouldn't shoot me," Frank said. "You may bluff, but you wouldn't shoot."

"It's all over for us," Neal called. "I don't owe you a damn thing, so don't try it, see?"

The marshal motioned for the onlookers to stand back, and he gathered himself, lunging at the door. The bolt gave, and he was in the room, and the gunfire rolled, filling the night with its wicked sound. A table went over, half-drowning out a man's heavy grunt; Neal Archer came out at a plowing run, bowling through the saloon and out onto Custer Street.

FRANK BURK lay propped against the near wall, his gun sagging across his stomach; his left arm lay bullet broke and twisted beside him. Ella knelt beside him, crying and tearing at her petticoat to wipe the dirt and slick sweat from his face. He laid his gun down and took her wrist, stopping her movement. "He could always beat me with a sixgun—he'd done it before. We was always fightin' about somethin'." He smiled and shifted himself to a more comfortable position. "He'll be waiting for you at the hotel, Ella—ashamed and sorry."

"I don't need him now," she said softly.

She tried to minister to his wound but he stopped her hands. "Ella, all of my life I've tried to be better than Neal, but he's just naturally better than me. He needs you, Ella, just like I need someone like you. But he's God's own fool over the wimmen."

That look came into her eyes again like a bright sunrise, full of hope and dreams she would only dream and never have. He saw it and understood it and it filled him with a bit of wonder. She said, "You know what I want to do—what I want to say?"

He nodded and told her, "You'll never say it, Ella, because you're not that kind of woman." He nodded toward the alley and murmured, "She's that kind of a woman, but it doesn't make her less of a woman." He sighed deeply, whether from his pain or his thought, she didn't know. He added, "You see—there's not

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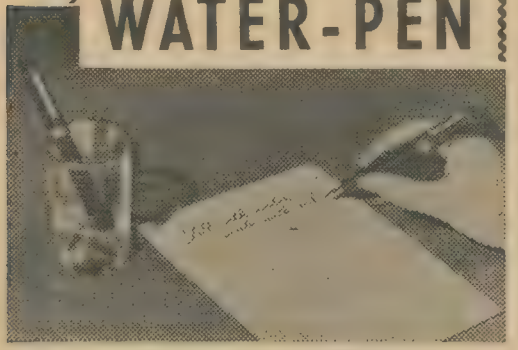

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much difference in the Archers after all. It's just in the point of view."

She stood up then, her dress rustled softly, and the lamp behind her outlined her for him to see. She had a full, flowing body and, although she would never speak her thoughts to him now, she silently offered him this without shame. He smiled and she turned and went out, and, for a moment, he was alone.

Angeleta came in with the doctor, her eyes red from crying; there was an open shame in her face. Frank Burk braced himself against the pain while the doctor moved his crippled arm. He watched the dark-haired girl and said firmly, "Don't go over there! Stay where you belong."

"What will happen to him now?"

"Nothing," Burk said, and added, "Nothing that will hurt him anyway. He'll go home and worry and wonder the rest of his life. Maybe it'll put blinders on his rovin' eyes—maybe it'll make him worse. But if I smoothed it over between us now, he'd go back to the way he was. I think too much of Ella to wish that on her."

Angeleta's face had lost its harshness, and she pillowed his head against the softness of her breasts. She murmured, "You were always right, Frank. You always knew what was good for Neal and me. It's a shame we never listened to you." She pressed her warm lips against his forehead, much to the doctor's disgust, and said, "You won't leave me, will you? You're all I have left now."

He turned his face away from her when the doctor splinted his arm, the pain making beads of sweat stand out on his forehead. It passed for him, and with it some hope and perhaps some of his restraint, because he said, "No man ever really failed you, Angeleta—least of all me. I'm God's own fool when it comes to wimmen."

He looked at her, and she was smiling. Even the doctor smiled at the wisdom of the remark. . . . ★ ★ ★

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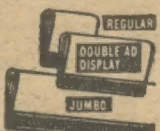

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(Continued from page 8)

her, and made the long journeys short.

When it came time for the parting, Isabella was as gentle as ever. She stepped daintily into a waiting carriage and looked down smilingly on Jim who stood there, hat in hand, his golden hair hanging at his shoulders. In his hands were the reins which he had held, and beside him was the horse she had ridden over eight hundred miles in the Rockies, with the most feared man in the whole mountain range at her side. Isabella said goodbye, and the carriage moved to the railroad where a train would take her homeward to England.

She waved a last goodbye to the figure standing beside the horse and as the buggy topped a rise which would separate them, she glimpsed a hat waving against the blue Colorado sky. In six months Jim would be dead. He would die a violent death, by gun-fire, as violent a death as the life he had pursued. Were his last thoughts about the valiant little lady from England who had no fear of broncos and pretended not to know a desperado when she saw one?

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